

Final Fantasy 9: Underworld Chaos

Josh1013

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Summary

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Description:

This story takes place immediately after the ending of ff9. Everything seems to be going perfectly, but the events that took place in the fight against Kuja have broken the seal on the gateway to the Underworld. What fiends and new threats await within? will our heroes be able to close the gateway, or will all of Gaia be lost?

1. Prologue

Laughter rang through Alexandria's halls as a cloaked woman quietly made her way toward the conference room where the sounds had come from. Water dripped from her dark robe and the few raven locks that had fallen from beneath her hood, even though there had been no rain outside the castle that day. She was hesitant in her movements, being careful to stay in the shadows so that she would not be noticed, for if they saw her... No, she could not dwell on it, it was far too late for that now.

There was no doubt that what she was doing was wrong but knowing she should not be here and stopping herself from coming were two very different things, the latter had been impossible. Despite knowing she was helpless to do otherwise, with each step closer to her destination her heart grew heavier. He had said it would not be easy, but dammit he hadn't told her it would be this hard... and gods was she tired. She had been through so much, lost so much. A part of her wanted to just give up, let it all fade to black, but then all of it would have been for nothing...

As she placed her hands on the doors to the conference room, she let out a shaky breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and peered through the crack in the doors that hadn't been completely shut. She was thankful that the guards had been relieved for the day as she watched the scene inside unfold.

...

All of the old friends were sitting at the large conference table, a feast laid out before them. Freya was currently telling Garnet and the others of how well the reconstruction of Burmecia was coming along and noticed that again Garnet's attention had shifted to Zidane.

Freya recalled how even just an hour beforehand, the girl had greeted their arrival wearing a smile, but with eyes that had told a much different story. They had not yielded the passion they once held during their travels together. Ever since the day that Zidane had left them, she had seemed to be almost an empty shell of her former self. She had heard that the young queen could always be found going from meeting to meeting and spending the rest of her time locked in her chamber doing paperwork, almost never stepping foot outside unless the occasion

demanded it. Freya, like the others, had just pretended not to notice, because she knew personally how painful losing the one you loved could be.

But now that he had returned, Garnet hadn't stopped smiling and it was as if the last two years had been washed away from her. When had she become so smitten? She silently told herself that if he left or he hurt her again, she would personally hunt him down and make him wish he hadn't.

Freya chuckled quietly to herself. It was no surprise that the boy was the center of the young queen's attention, even in the middle of a conversation, but she couldn't resist having a little fun at her expense.

"How long do you think that would take, Garnet?" She asked with a wink to Beatrix.

"Huh? Well I... um I think that.." Garnet stammered, her face reddening as she tried to remember what the conversation had been about. After a few seconds she gave up at trying to recover. "I apologize Freya I.. I didn't hear you." Garnet replied, still blushing furiously. When had the room gotten so quiet?

Suddenly the room burst into laughter. Above all the laughter Eiko's voice could still be heard loud and clear. "Gosh! Why don't you guys just kiss already?!" At this Garnet turned even redder. (If that were possible) She looked again at Zidane, Who was grinning and commented devilishly. "I definitely wouldn't complain!"

After the moment had passed (and her blushing had finally died down) Garnet spent the rest of the meal listening as her friends told of how they had been the last few months and of course the most pressing topic: what had taken Zidane so long to return.

The thief in question had just scratched the back of his head and said that he had been wounded by the Lifa tree and that it had taken him a long time to regain the strength to travel back. She felt that there was more to the story but decided she had plenty of time to ask him more about it later.

As the day turned to night, Freya, Eiko, Cid and the others bid their farewells and left the castle having enjoyed the celebration of their returning friend, to return to their homes. Garnet offered to let them stay in the castle, but they had all similarly

declined. Steiner and Beatrix soon retired for the night as well, leaving the two reunited lovers alone.

“So uh.. where do I sleep?” Zidane asked, scratching the back of his head sheepishly.

“I um.. I thought you might want to... sleep in my room?” Garnet said with a blush.

He laughed. “Alright, I sure as hell won’t say no to that. But uh.. You sure you don’t mind? I don’t want to make you uncomfortable or anything. If you want me to, I’ll be happy to sleep on the couch or even the floor.”

She shook her head dismissively. “It’s okay.”

“I wish to talk to you.” She commented as she began climbing the stairs to her room with Zidane trailing close behind. Neither of them noticed the cloaked woman that had been watching them as she carefully placed a broken necklace on a small table near the stairs. With tears streaming down her face, she turned and disappeared down the empty hallway.

Shortly after, Garnet was seated on the bed with a rather surprisingly nervous Zidane beside her. “How did you make it out of the Lifa Tree?” she asked tentatively.

“I told you, I had to come home to you.” He replied simply.

“I know...” She trailed, deciding to push the subject further. “but how did you make it out of there? The whole tree collapsed, and it was like the whole tree was attacking you!”

He let out a sigh somewhere between annoyance and defeat. “Honestly? I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean?” she replied with a puzzled look.

“Well.. I uh.. I don’t exactly remember how I made it out of there. I remember running down the roots, even riding a few of them as they went crazy. As I got near the bottom I got threw off, and I’m not sure how long I was out for before I woke up hearing Kuja calling out to me.. I finally managed to climb up to where Kuja was, but he was in horrible shape and as much as I didn’t want to admit it, we both knew he was going to die... but I couldn’t just leave him to die alone.”

Zidane looked down at his hands with growing sadness for a moment before continuing. “I’m not sure how long I sat there before I felt him start to pass.. In the end he told me that he was sorry for

everything he had done... I just couldn't help feelin bad for him, cus it could just as easily have been me that did all that..”

“Zidane..” Garnet started as she put her head on his shoulder. “You’re not like him Zidane. He.. He was a monster. He did not care about anyone, but himself.”

“But I am like him..” Zidane protested.

Garnet scooted back on the bed and turned to face him. “You are nothing like him.” She said firmly. “I know he was your brother, and maybe if things had happened differently, you might have been more like him. But they didn’t. You’re you, Zidane. You’re the kindest, most caring man I’ve ever met. I know you’d never hurt anyone that didn’t deserve it, and you will never convince me otherwise.”

Zidane smiled weakly as he looked into her eyes. “How did I ever make it without you?” He chuckled and looked away. “Anyway, as I was sitting there with him, I heard a loud roar of wind and managed to look up in time to see a dozen or more roots coming straight at us. I didn’t have time to jump out of the way, so I just tried to shield his body. I don’t

know what happened next, but everything went black... I don't know for how long.

After a few moments of quiet silence, He looked back at her and could see the pain in her eyes as she tried to picture it. "I kind of remember being lifted and carried by something or someone, but I have no idea what or who... I just can't remember... What I do remember is waking up on the ground not far from the mountain path. I could barely move I was hurting so bad, but all I could think about was seeing you again. I didn't think I would make it to Condie Petie, but every time I felt like giving up, I felt like I could almost hear you singing our song. It always reminded me that if nothing else, I didn't want you to be alone. So, I'd sing along, and somehow it would always give me the strength to pick myself up again."

When he looked up again, she was sobbing. "Oh Zidane... I.. I love you too." And with that she threw herself into his arms and he held her.

"What do you say we lay down and I can talk as long as you want me to or until you fall asleep? Cus you look exhausted." She let out a light chuckle in-between sobs, and smiled. "That sounds like a plan, and I'm sorry, I haven't rested much lately."

“Why not?”

“Because I um... well I haven’t really slept much... since you left...”

“Dag...” Zidane leaned in and kissed her lips. He had kissed other women before their journey together, but this one was like nothing he had ever experienced. It started off as a very gentle kiss, but he could almost taste the need in her lips as she kissed him back; he knew it was something he would never forget.

“Zidane?” Garnet asked, breaking from the kiss and looking up at him with a contented smile. ‘Yea?’ he replied dreamily. “Will you promise me that you will still be here when I wake up?”

“Always.” He smiled, pulling her close.

For the first time since Zidane had left, Garnet sleep a peaceful dreamless sleep.

“Are all the preparations in order?” The elderly man seated at the head of a large table in a dimly lit castle room asked in a cracked voice.

“Yesss, M’lord. Everything has been prepared just as you have insstructed.” A seething little man in a cloak hissed as he approached the table carefully.

“What of the queen, Your Excellence?” A young man also seated at the table dressed in the attire fitting of a prince spoke up.

“She is of little importance to me. Alexandria will fall and the Black Tower will rise from where it once stood. What happens to its queen matters not; you may do with her as you please.” Another man seated across from him replied coldly as he topped off his glass of whiskey. “It is the dawn of a new age. The fools believe that it is a time of peace, but it is merely the calm before a mighty storm that will change the face of Gaia into a new world exactly as our lord has envisioned it. See to it that the boy with the tail and his friends do not cause us any problems. I have waited far too long for there to be any mistakes.”

“Yes, Father. I believe I shall have a little fun with the queen before her world comes tumbling down. Ha! As for the fool with the tail, taking care of him will be like crushing an insect.”

“Let not your ego get the best of you Damian. The boy is not to be underestimated. He and his pitiable friends did manage to defeat Necron and Kuja after all, though their powers were meagre compared to ours.” Damian’s father stood up walked toward the stained-glass window. “And Damian, you will kill the queen. I will not allow your sudden fascination with her affect our plan. Unless you would prefer that I send someone else more capable?”

Damian let out a low sneer but consented. “I will see it done, Father.”

2. Mysterious Introductions

A few weeks following Zidane's return, It was about midnight at a small camp somewhere on the mist continent. It had only been raining for a few minutes, but the two travelers that crouched underneath the worn-out tent were already well past soaked. The wind blew the rain with such savagery that even had it been a new tent the rain would have still found its way in.

“Don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't like the rain, it's just.. It's ludicrous!” Does it have to rain almost every day and night!? They say Burmecia is the place where the rain never stops, but I'm beginning to think it happens everywhere! We cannot even start a fire! “exclaimed the blond haired man seated nearest the opening of the tent. The man is in his early thirties. He has a short beard just a few shades darker than his dirty blond hair. He wore battle boots, and a blue tunic with a white cape. He carries a rune blade adorned with a small red crystal on its hilt.

“It seems your patience leaves you more the older you get.” The second man laughed. He was a little

older with brown hair almost down to his shoulders. He also wore boots made for war, his arms were covered with mythrill gauntlets and his vest was made of leather that was beginning to show signs of heavy wear. He wore a dirty silver cloak that had seen much use. On his back he carried a sword. Its hilt was engraved with intricate words of another language. At his waist a dagger was sheathed that appeared to be made of a rare metal and very old wood.

“...Perhaps. I had thought that maybe by now I would be living on an island somewhere without a care in the world. But alas, here we are attempting to stop the world for being torn asunder again.” The blond haired man sighed.

“At least we yet live to tell the tale, and are able still to fight instead of lying on death’s bed.” He replied taking a slow drag from his pipe.

“That really is a bad habit.” The blond haired man commented, waving smoke from his face. “Indeed we can tell the tale, though I am sure few would listen and even fewer still would believe it. By the way, why did you help the boy? I agree we should help people that need us, but he was already dead. Now, the stone will have to recharge before it

is of any use again, not to mention that it cost you five years of your life.”

“It is my life to give is it not? And we will be here for some time, I fear even the stones will do little to help us prevent the inevitable.”

“I am not judging your actions, I am merely curious as to why?”

“I do not know.. I heard of his strength and of his character. I decided perhaps he deserved the second chance that I never had.”

The bland haired man smiled a smile that showed both understanding and filled with regret. “Rasler, the events that have happened were not of your doing. You did everything you could to return to your wife, but in the end, perhaps it simply wasn’t meant to be. You cannot hold on to this regret forever. You need to move on, as I have.”

“I know that, Ramza, but perhaps where I failed, he can succeed in finding happiness that I will never know. I also believe that he also has a very important part to play in this battle as well.” He replied as he gathered his meager belongings and started out the tent into the driving rain. “I believe it is time I go to Alexandria. If I hurry, I may yet arrive

before our enemies lay waste to it. If you will, continue on to Lindblum. I believe you may be able to do some good there.”

Ramza laughed. I believe I will wait till first light, or until the rain has slackened, but I will head there and speak with the regent. Be wary as you travel, we do not know yet exactly what we are up against. It may yet still be nothing.”

“Same to you brother, but I must make haste! For it is still a three day journey by foot if weather is favorable, and it certainly isn’t.” he laughed, and without another word, he departed for Alexandria.

“What is taking so long!?” Zidane yelled in frustration, his tail thrashing side to side wildly and continued pacing back and forth angrily in the main hall. “Those damned snobby nobles have had her in there for all day! What the hell are they doing with Dagger anyway!?” he exclaimed again with a frustrated sigh.

“Perhaps, it would be best if you stepped outside for some fresh air?” Beatrix replied uninterestedly from her post guarding the door to the conference room. “I’ve already told you, the Royal Counsel

called the meeting. It has only been three hours. These things take time. Her Majesty will come out as soon as it is over and she will tell you what it is about if she wishes. As I have already told you, The Counsel did not tell me why they wish to speak to Her Majesty, though I doubt it is anything too serious in these times of peace.”

Zidane just sighed dramatically, rousing a slight chuckle from Beatrix as she tossed her hair over her shoulder out of habit. “Fine! I won’t be gone long. Can you tell Dag that if I’m not in there when she comes out, that ill come to her room when I get back.. Thanks!” and without giving the General the time to process that he had been staying in Garnet’s room instead of his guest room, he left.

He soon found himself sitting next to a tree in the lower courtyard that overlooked the docks. His thoughts, however, were not on the view before him, but on a certain raven haired woman that he just couldn’t seem to get off his mind. *Damn I’m a lucky guy.* He thought as he laid back on the grass, closing his eyes. *I hope everything works out, I just can’t help but have a feelin that something bad is gonna happen. What are the odds I’d get to spend my life with a woman like her? Hell, she’s a queen and I’m just—*”

“Lovely weather isn’t it Master Tribal?”

“Whoa wha..? He started as he snapped from his thoughts and noticed the man crouched down before him. How had he not heard him walking up?” Uh.. yea I guess. How do you know my name? “he said sitting up and scratching the back of his head.

The man standing in front of Zidane stood up and smiled. “I’d wager most everyone knows who you are, the infamous Zidane Tribal.”

Zidane groaned inwardly as he stood up facing the man. He wanted to tell the man to just leave him be, but he remembered that Dagger had asked him to be nice to everyone (particularly the snobby nobles that he hated). “Uh.. I guess you got me there, but I have no idea who you are.? Shit, I’m sorry. If you’re here looking for Dag— I mean Garnet, she’s in a meeting.” He said, trying to be as nice as possible.

“No, I am the one that should apologize. I have forgotten my manners. My name is Edrick. I did not mean to catch you off guard. Alas, I did not come here to speak to her majesty. I must confess that it is you that I had hoped to find.”

“Me? What do you want with me? Do I know you?” he asked, eying the man suspiciously. He

wondered if he had stolen something from him at one point or the other, or if he was just up to something.

The man laughed. “No, I don’t suppose you do, but I do know you and not just by reputation. I have something urgent I wish to discuss with you, if you do not mind and if have the time.”

“Uh.. Ok? What’s that?”

“Again I must apologize, but I cannot tell you here. You never know who may be listening. Come with me if u will. There is an abandoned church near the edge of town that has yet to be restored. Will you follow me there? I mean you no harm. And for your trouble, or if you do not find what I have to say worth your time I will give you a very valuable trinket for both you and your loved one.”

Zidane was hesitant to follow this “Edrick”, but upon hearing of the valuable item that he could give Dagger to make her smile changed his mind. After all, how tough could this guy be? He reasoned that even if it was a trap he could surely get out unscathed. It might even be challenging.

The two men boarded the small boat, which was unmanned at the moment, and shortly after they

arrived in town. Zidane followed the man, becoming a little more uneasy as they moved through the lesser crowded part of Alexandria and into the slums. Was it just him, or were there less people in town? It was approaching evening as the pair came in sight of the church. It was a complete wreck, Zidane thought. The walls had holes in them that were big enough to crawl through, part of the roof had collapsed, and the rest was in horrible disarray and had obviously seen many seasons of wear. A part of him worried that the place might collapse at any moment, but as they walked through the loosely hung rotting door the floor and building seemed to hold their weight, and true to the man's word, there wasn't anyone else around that could listen to anything that was said.

"I apologize for bringing you all the way out here..."

....

"Thank the gods that's over." Garnet said quietly as she stepped into the hallway. *I thought that meeting would never end..* she looked around, warily noting how dark it was considering it had been morning when the meeting had started. Even Beatrix

, ever standing at the ready, seemed to be exhausted.
“How late is it Beatrix?”

“I believe it is around 8pm, your Highness.”

“I told you that you do not have to be so formal.. but thank you. Have you seen Zidane?” she asked suddenly looking around. The general allowed herself a laugh and replied. ‘I believe he said he would be in your room. As usual?’ she added. This caused the younger woman to blush furiously. “Thank you Beatrix.”

Garnet turned and walked quickly to her chamber, eager to see the thief who had stolen her heart. As she opened the door she couldn’t help but smile knowing that he’d be dramatically waiting in her, but as she entered the room her smile fell as she noticed that Zidane was nowhere to be found. From the looks of her well-made bed, he had not been here either. “Beatrix?” she called as she walked back to the door, worry evident on her face. “Yes, your Highness?”

“He’s not here. Do you know where he could have gone? It’s not like him to just leave..”

“I told him to go get some fresh air earlier today, perhaps he ran into some friends in town and lost

track of time?”

“I hope so..” she replied distantly.

“What is bothering you? Your-...Garnet”

Garnet smiled for a moment. “Thank you for trying Beatrix..” she trailed off growing distant again. “I just hope it’s not something I did.. or that the castle isn’t too much for him..”

“Do not worry yourself, I am certain he will be back soon.” She commented with a grin. “I doubt he will be able to stay away from you long.

“I apologize for bringing you all the way out here.” The man said, lighting a small candle and placing it on a small table.

“S’ok” Zidane replied. He couldn’t help himself from looking around the room cautiously as if something might jump out at him in a matter of seconds. Even his tail seemed to be wary of his surrounding as it moved side to side over the dusty floor.

“You’ve no need to worry, I have no intention of hurting you. After all, that would be a bit

counterproductive. Wouldn't it?"

"What do you mean counter-whatever?"

"First, I must again apologize; my name is not Edrick. He was a character in a book I once read, a mighty warrior that fell in battle having fought bravely to defend his king. My name is Rasler. I thought it best if others did not know my identity yet. As for what I meant by counterproductive, let me ask you, would it make a lot of sense to bring back someone from the dead only so that you can kill them later?"

"Wait." Zidane said, grabbing the edge of the table. A look of confusion and anger seemed to fill his face at once. "What the HELL are you talking about?"

"Precisely what I said. Tell me.. Do you remember making it out of the Lifa Tree, having failed to save your brother?"

"Wha-What?" Zidane suddenly found it very hard to stand as Rasler brought to life all the things he had doubted and could not remember.

"Do you remember climbing for the roots of the great tree? I'd wager that you do not."

“You’re full of shit!” Zidane yelled angrily, turning to leave.

“You know that I speak the truth. I am sorry for being blunt and that it is hard to hear, but you died with your brother.”

He did not reply but stood, his gaze fixated on the ground.

“After hours of cutting away the demented roots, in the place where the girl Mikoto said that you would be, I found your body. It was crushed beyond recognition by the mighty roots. I feared that, even with the power of the stone, I would be able to do nothing to restore you. After careful consideration, I ventured to try. At first, the stone seemed to be doing nothing, but as I used my own life energy to enhance its power, your body soon became whole again.”

Zidane tried desperately to process what he was hearing. As much as he didn’t want to believe it, it was the only thing that made sense. He remembered the vines coming at him, and knowing that he was going to die and that he would never see Dagger again.

“... You mean Mikoto knew that I died?..”

“Yes. She told me where she last felt your energy as you passed.”

“Damn.. So I didn’t even keep my promise.”

“What promise?”

“It’s Nothin..” He let out a defeated sigh. “..I promised Dagger I’d come back to her.”

“Well, it would seem you did keep your promise after all.”

“No I didn’t. I DIED.” He said angrily.

“Everyone needs assistance from time to time. I have given you a great gift Zidane. Do not waste it by delving head first into self-pity.”

“Damn.” Zidane kicked a piece of broken furniture across the room. “Shit... So I guess I owe you a lot, huh? Is that why you wanted me to come here? To return the favor?”

As if on purpose, rain suddenly started to fall. Rasler shook his head and chuckled as he remember Ramza’s earlier words regarding the rain. If the deterioration of the building wasn’t evident before, it became painfully obvious as the rain came in, barely hindered by the roof.

“No.” he replied as he took a seat on one of the rotted pews, which groaned in protest to his weight. “You owe me nothing. The gift that I have given you, I did so freely. You may live your life as you wish. You may even leave now and return to the castle if you desire, but the reason I have asked you to come here is far bigger than you and I.”

“What are you talking about? What do you mean bigger than us?”

As the two men talked, the rain only seemed to worsen, and the evening turned to night.

It was approaching midnight. The young queen had been pacing the floor for what seemed like hours, waiting for any signs of a certain thief. *Where could he be?* She thought. Sure he hadn’t stayed in the castle the whole time he had been back, but he was always back before sundown to spend time with her. Had she said something wrong? Had he found another? The endless thoughts made her feel nauseous, not to mention she had already been exhausted at the end of the meeting.

“Your majesty?” Beatrix asked, walking back into the room.

“Yes, Beatrix?” she said impatiently.

I apologize that it took so long, but I checked the bar, Ruby’s theatre, and everywhere else I could think of, but no luck. Aside from the guards at the dock, the only person that saw him was an elderly gentleman that swears he saw him following the same man into the part of the city that has yet to be restored.”

“What? Who was it?”

“I have tried to find out more, but I have failed.” Beatrix replied tiredly. She looked miserable having spent the last two hours out in the drenching rain.

Garnet grabbed her old white mage cloak and started for the door. “I apologize Beatrix, but I must go look for him... I just.. I have a really bad feeling.”

“Your majesty, I am certain he is fine.” She started, blocking the door. “Please try to rest and be patient. I have already sent four guards into that district, if he’s there, they will find him. Please, your Highness., you are already exhausted.” She practically begged. Normally she would not oppose the queen, but although she would not admit it, she was exhausted as well.

Garnet released the door knob, and turned around reluctantly. “..alright. I will try, but if he isn’t back by morning..”

“Then Steiner and I will search until we find him.”(and wring his damned neck) she added quietly to herself.

“Do you now fully understand why I’ve come to you?”

“Yea.. I think so.”

“Good. Now that you understand, what say you? Will you help us Zidane?”

Zidane slowly sat up, only now realizing just how cold it was, thanks to the ongoing rain. He was beyond drenched. Though he hadn’t physically done much, he felt utterly exhausted from all he had learned.

“I’ll do whatever I can.” He replied slowly shaking his head. “So much for things being easy from now on.”

“Thank you, Zidane. Please tell no one of the things we have discussed. I know that it is a heavy

burden but it is for the best as I am certain you are aware.” Rasler also stood up gathering his sword from under the pew.

“I wont... I’ll just tell them I was drinking with Tantalus.” With a final nod Zidane turned to leave. “I gotta hurry back, Dag’s gonna be worried sick.”

“One last thing before you go.”

Zidane turned to see Rasler digging in his small pack. After a moment he pulled out a wristband and a delicate necklace. The wristband looked to be made of some sort of foreign metal adorned with a blue crystal in the center and smaller crystals circling the band. The necklace seemed to be made almost identical to the bracelet, however it only had a single blue crystal in the center. Its make seemed far more delicate, and it seemed to glisten even in the dimly lit room. “I promised you a trinket, did I not?”

“It’s ok. You don’t have to—” He started, waving his hand dismissively.

Rasler quickly interrupted. “Take them. Put on the bracelet, and give the necklace to your queen. Consider it a thank you for your help in the very near future. The bracelet and necklace are one of a

kind.. In truth, their value is perhaps worth more than all the gil in Alexandria..”

“And you’re just gonna let me have them?..” he asked, skeptically.

“Yes... money means little to me. These items have very magical properties, far greater than its monetary value. Put on the bracelet and you will see for yourself what it does. Although I should warn you it will not be pleasant at first.”

Stepping forward, Zidane took the bracelet and put it on his left wrist, after a moment of wondering if it may be a bad idea. Suddenly a sharp pain shot through his body, emanating from the bracelet. he could do nothing but shut his eyes and try to keep from screaming. After a moment, the pain subsided. Zidane opened his eyes and the room seemed much clearer than it had before; the rain also didn’t seem to matter anymore.

“What-What the hell just happened?” he stammered.

“The bracelet belonged to a lost king that would have ruled a mighty kingdom. Legend has it that the bracelet gave him the ability to see things as they really were, not how they looked to everyone else.

I'm not sure to what extent that holds true, but it also makes the wearer immune to certain magic and only the wearer can see it when it is being worn."

"Shit.." He said looking at it in disbelief. "What does the necklace do?"

"It was to be a gift from the same King to his wife, if anything were to happen to her while she wore it, in her final moments the necklace would begin to glow. She would then be transported safely to the king's chamber, but alas he was never able to present it to her and it is said that these are the only proof left that he ever existed.

"So.. As long as Dag wears this she'll always be safe.." He muttered. "How in the hell am I ever gonna repay you?"

"Go home Zidane, before everything is said and done, I think you will find it is I who have done very little to swing the odds in our favor. Do not rely solely on the objects power for even the best magic can fail. We will meet again, Zidane. Do not forget what we have discussed, for the next time you see me, you will know that great peril has come with me."

He started to leave and stopped one more time at the doorway. "I know I haven't really said it, but thank you.. for everything, and I will find a way to repay you." With that, Zidane turned and hurried toward the castle.

Dag's gonna kill me! He thought as he raced through the collapsed buildings. What am I gonna tell her? Dammit, I've never been good at lying to her. Somehow she always sees right through me. As he darted through an alley he scarcely noticed the man standing at the end of it, but when he did, he stopped in his tracks and stepped back a few feet. The man looked horribly disfigured. His face was that of a fiend, his eyes blacker than the night that shadowed them, but as he closed his eyes and took a second look, an old man stood before him.

"Are you Mr. Tribal?" the old man asked with a smile.

"I.. Who's asking?" he replied with caution, unconsciously rubbing the armband.

"I am but an old man." He cackled feebly. "I believe that you must be."

"Somehow I doubt that." He mumbled, reaching for the dagger that he was suddenly very glad he

always carried.

“Why such caution? Surely you’re not scared of a feeble old man..” He said, seemingly growing taller and more menacing. “” Who was that you came here with?”

“None of your damn business. Look, I just wanna get home.” Zidane growled, pulling his dagger from its sheath.

“You would truly raise a weapon against an old man?” He said innocently.

“..I’ll do whatever I have to.” Zidane replied taking a step forward trying to act as though the old man did not unnerve him.

“I do not know how you made it out of that tree which was to be your tomb, but do you truly believe a pathetic mortal like yourself standsss a chance against me!?”

The old man twisted and contorted into the fiend he had first seen but hoped had been his imagination. Its body stood like a human, but its skin was a deep purple. Its feet bore three large claws. Its fingers became elongated and grew sharp black fingernails, and its face was the same color as its body save for the black horns atop its head. Its

teeth were like that of a behemoth but black and dripping with venom. The most menacing feature, however, was the voids where its eyes should have been.

“What are you?” Zidane breathed. Rasler hadn’t described anything like the creature that now blocked the path before him.

“Your kind callsss me an arch-fiend, but my name Zyrosss. You say you wish to go home? I will send you to your new home.. The blacknesssss of death!” it screeched.

“Holy shit!” Zidane yelled, jumping to the side as it charged toward him much faster than he had expected. ‘Damn that thing is fast.’ He said to himself, getting back to his feet. Here goes nothing. He thought, lunging forward with his own attack “Thievery”. The fiend apparently had not expected him to retaliate that quickly, as the attack hit it dead-on. The beast screeched, but much to Zidane’s horror it seemed to do very little damage (if not just having made it angrier). The Fiend lunged toward him again, but this time he knew he wouldn’t have time to jump out of the way, so he stabbed with all the strength he could toward its neck as it connected with him. He could feel his blade penetrate its soft

neck deeply, but he also felt one of its claws stab into his side. The next thing he registered was that he was being thrown against the broken building near which they had been fighting. He could feel at least one of his ribs breaking as his body slammed into the wall. The piercing sound of the fiend's screech only served to disorient him further as he struggled to get back on his feet. Only after he regained his balance did he realize that he was alone, his knife laying on the ground in a pool of dark blood.

“Dammit..” he gasped, coughing up blood. He clutched his side and limping as quickly as he could to pick up his knife. “Where.. in the hell did it go?” he asked aloud. He waited around for a few moments expecting it to attack again, but there was nothing but the steady pouring of rain already washing away the only trace of it. He guessed that he must have injured it with his last attack. He let out a relieved sigh and began to limp back to the castle holding his side when he heard a hiss from his left. Looking up just in time, he saw the fiend hurdling toward him; he ducked and rolled out of the way almost crying out at the waves of pain the movements sent through his body. Despite the pain, he managed to bring his dagger up in time to meet

its claws as they lunged for his throat. It didn't let up, he could feel his arms shake under the creature's strength and knew he wouldn't be able to hold it back for much longer. But, as though drifted to Dagger and what all he would leave behind, trance washed over him. His trance surprised and it lept back from its attack.

He had tranced many times before, but this one felt different. Not only did he feel even stronger than he had the times before, but everything felt as though it were moving slower. He didn't take the time to revel in it and instead pushed the power through his arms and out of his blade, unleashed the most power Grand Lethal he could manage toward the fiend. As his attack connected, he could hear the creature's howl of torment and the smell of its burning flesh. When the light and smoke cleared the creature was gone. It was different from the first time; somehow he knew would truly gone, at least for now. As his trance subsided, he collapsed to the ground in pain and exhaustion.

He lied there for what seemed like hours before he finally recovered enough strength to pick himself up and slowly make his way back to the castle.

3. Foreboding News

“Where in the god’s hell have you been!?” Beatrix started as he came through the door. His tail was dripping rain and hanging limply as he gently closed the door behind him. ‘Her Majesty has been worried sick that yo— “She stopped upon noticing the blood running from his side and that he seemed barely aware of her.” What happened to you?’ she said with more concern. She knew Zidane was a very strong fighter, in truth perhaps even stronger than her, so what had happened to hurt him so badly? “We must get you to the medical ward, her Majesty will—”

“Zidane!” Garnet exclaimed, running through the door and to Zidane’s side. She was both relieved that he was back, and shocked at the shape that hey was in. As she met him he collapsed, taking her small frame with him. ‘I got you.. somethin..’ he said weakly, holding out the necklace for her in his bloody hand. “Promise.. promise I.. did’n steal..” He tried, but the relief of being back and seeing her was too much, before he could finish everything faded to black.

“Zida..

“Zidane..”

“Zidane!”

“Ugh..Uhn..” Zidane moaned as he opened his eyes. It took a moment for him to be able to see but as he did, his eyes focused on the raven haired woman above him. ‘Am I in heaven?’ he asked as he stared at her face wearing his usual grin. “I must be to wake up to someone as beautiful as you.”

Garnet let out a sigh looking down at him from her spot sitting beside him on the bed where he was laying. After a moment of staring at the boy, she shook her head. “What happened to you last night?” She asked tiredly.

“What, no good morning kiss?” he grinned.

“Zidane. Please tell me.. I was so worried about you.. and apparently I had every reason to.”

Zidane sighed. It took a few seconds of struggling, but he finally managed to sit up and looked into her tired eyes. “Did you even sleep last night?” He asked, hoping to change subject.

“...”

“Dagger?” he asked again, but she said nothing and turned away from him. “Alright, alright, but please don’t stop talking to me, I hate when you do that.”

“Then tell me.” she said sternly.

“Damn.. I was never good at lying to you anyway...” he let out a groan. “I met a guy, who said that he helped me escape the Lifa Tree.”

“What!? What did he say?” Garnet asked, her tired eyes now full of surprise and curiosity. He could have laughed at the sudden change of her mood; if it wouldn’t have hurt too bad.

“He said that.. Dammit..” he couldn’t look at her anymore as he continued. “He said that I didn’t make it out..”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, her voice resonating her confusion.

“Alright I’ll just say it.. he said I died at the Lifa tree.”

Zidane could tell that she was finding this hard to believe. “But that.. that’s not possible.. Because I mean you’re here, you came back Zidane.. No, he

lied.” She sounded certain but he could see the traces of doubt in her eyes.

“He was telling the truth... hell it makes sense doesn’t it? Everyone said they couldn’t believe I made it out, and they were right. He said Mikoto told him where my body was, and he used the power of some damn stone to bring me back to life by giving up part of his, he then carried me to the mountain path and dropped me in the shade so that I could stay there until I woke up... the way he described thing, he was telling the truth... I... I’m sorry I failed you.” As he finished, he couldn’t help but cry knowing he had let her down.

He expected Dagger to run off or at least be angry with him. He didn’t just think she would, he was sure, and he wouldn’t have blamed her. “Zidane..” she said softly taking his hands in hers. ‘You didn’t fail anyone, especially me.’ Zidane finally returned his gaze to her eyes, and he saw nothing but love and compassion. “You did come home to me.” She cried, hugging him. “Even if he was telling the truth, it doesn’t matter. I know you’re no knight in shining armor; honestly, you get on my nerves terribly sometimes and you make me stay up worried about you, but you’re the best thing that’s

ever happened to me and you've never let me down."

He couldn't help but smile at her. Why did he ever doubt her? "Then I'm gonna spend my life trying to keep it that way, cause gods know I don't deserve you." With that, he took her in the most passionate kiss he could muster.

Breaking from the kiss, she playfully hit him on the shoulder. "You still haven't told me what happened to you."

"How bout I tell you after you rest? You look exhausted."

Dagger sighed. "I can't, I have more meetings that need attending to." She sighed again. 'The life of the queen is never easy, but I'll come back as soon as I can.' She patted his leg and started to stand, but was interrupted as a tail latched onto her thigh. "Nope." Zidane said playfully. "You're resting. Whether you like it or not, cus otherwise I ain't letting go." he laughed.

She looked at him for a moment and tried to pull her leg free, but after a few moments of fruitless struggling, she finally shook her head in defeat, and laid down beside him resting her head on his chest.

Zidane wrapped his arm around her and smirked as he felt her start to fall asleep. "I knew you were exhausted." He whispered as she fell asleep. Looking down, he smiled as he finally noticed that she was wearing the necklace he had given her.

"I wish to speak to the Regent!" Ramza yelled at the guards blocking the way to the lift inside Lindblum castle.

"Only those who have been permitted may use the lift." The guard stated.

"Then please, tell the Regent that someone wishes to speak to him, and that it is a matter of dire necessity, that his life and many others might be spared." He replied, trying to be polite. He had always been courteous, perhaps even too courteous, but his patience was growing thin as he had been trying to reach the Regent for almost an hour.

"Alright.. wait here while I will go inform the Regent."

"Fine, but please hurry." Ramza said impatiently. I only hope that I am not too late, He thought. After what seemed like another hour of waiting the guard

finally returned. 'The Regent will see you.' Without another word, he boarded the lift and was soon standing before Regent Cid. "My guard tells me you have something important you wish to discuss with me? Could it have anything to do with the rumors of unusual monsters in the plains?"

"Yes, it very well could, Sir." Ramza answered in surprise.

"Please, you may call me Cid. What is your name? I do not believe we have met."

"Indeed we have not. My name is Ramza. I am certain that you do not know me, because I have only recently come to these lands you might say. I wish I had the words to say this more delicately, but a great danger is coming. If you do not make preparations, thousands, possibly including yourself I'm afraid, will perish. And that will only be the beginning."

"I have felt a feeling of dread these last few weeks. I feared that this peace would not last, but surely disaster would not come again so soon? Do you have any proof that something is coming?"

"I.." he looked remorsefully at his empty hands and back at the regent. "No."

“Is there anything else at all that you can tell me?” He sounded polite, but Ramza was sure he could hear frustration in his voice. He figured he could trust this man but was hesitant tell him everything. Would the risk be worth it? He decided he had little choice if he wanted Cid to believe the news he had brought. “Alright, I will tell you what I know but I admit it will be difficult to believe.”

Cid nodded in understanding. “Speak freely what you will.”

It took him a few minutes to find his words before he began. “My full name is Ramza Beoulve. I and my dear friend Rasler are here because a magical seal was broken. I believe it must have been at least two thousand years ago that he, I and the rest of our friends forged the seal. Well, I suppose forged is not the right word. We did not create the seal; it was much older than us, perhaps thousands of years old even in our time.”

“What was the seal for, and what caused it to break?” Cid asked, his face alive with curiosity and concern.

“It seals the doorway to the Underworld. Some have called it Hell, but I do not believe it is the same place. In my time, the seal had also broken.” His

voice grew pained as he continued. “We... We did not realize what was happening until it was too late. There were thousands of them. The creatures rose from the ground much like the ones that I ran into heading to Burmecia. We managed to somehow get past most of the army while the people that were left united and fought against them. Using objects of immeasurable power we eventually defeats the ones that were controlling the armies. Unfortunately, there were very few people left by then, and we found out that the fiends cannot be truly killed; at least not by any weapon we possessed. So, we hurried to the gateway fighting many of the same fiends again along the way. My sister... and the woman I loved... Rasler and I were the only ones that made it to the portal. When we sealed the gateway, we sealed ourselves as well so that we might could stop it from happening again.” He finished solemnly.

Cid did not reply for a long while and instead stared out of the high window across the fields and Lindblum. “We will prepare for war immediately.”

Ramza could only blink for a few moments as words would not come. Needless to say he hadn’t expected Cid’s response. “I.. you believe me even though I have no proof to speak of?”

“Yes, I believe you. I do not feel that you would have come here to warn me for no reason. That, and I have dealt with many people. A lot of them were far from noble, but without them, I believe Lindblum castle would not still be standing today.”

Ramza shook his head with a smile. “I apologize, it has been a very long time since I have gained any trust without struggle. I thank you, and I will try to be as honest and exact as I can be about any other details you wish to know.” He rambled.

Regent Cid stroked his mustache for a moment in a concerned manner before responding. “How do we go about re-sealing the gateway? And what do these other creatures look like that you have spoken of?”

“They are vile fiends, their true forms differ from one another, but they have always taken the form of a human, or choose to simply take over the mind of another. I believe they need a host or something to stay in this world.” Ramza replied. “As for what to do first I cannot say, I believe Alexandria will be the true eye of the storm. Rasler should be there by now to do what he can, but I fear he can do little because it took us too long trying to find all the objects that we used to seal them away only to not be successful. All I know is they can take the shape of anyone, but

they do not acquire their memories unless they have joined willingly. So be weary and make certain of whom you are speaking to. I do not know if you will be able to sense them as well, but I have always had a feeling of dread in their presence.”

“That is grave news indeed. Others might think me a fool for trusting a stranger to prepare for war in these times of peace, but I believe caution would be well founded. We will seal the city and meetings will be postponed for a time, save for our closest allies. I will not declare an attack until we have a foe that can be identified, but we will stay alert, and if this enemy comes we will be ready. I will also try to contact Alexandria. In the meantime, if you will and are able, go and see if you can find out more.”

Ramza nodded, and bowed respectfully. “I will do all that I can.”

Ramza left headed toward Burmecia. Within a few hours, Lindblum was officially sealed. The guards manned their post, expecting war.

....

“Morning Beautiful.” Zidane chuckled.

“Hmm..” Garnet groaned as she slowly opened her eyes, rubbing them. “What-What time is it?”

“About noon I think.”

“NOON! Oh gods, I’m late! Beatrix will kill me!’
Zidane just smiled watching her jump out of bed and rushing to get dressed.

“Late for what?”

She stopped in her frantic effort to get dressed long enough to shoot him a glare. “I told you I had a lot of meetings to attend to today. A queen cannot just miss meetings for no reason. And before you ask, I have no idea who I am meeting, only that he apparently wants to make a large contribution to the restoration of the kingdom that we desperately need and now he has probably already left.” After that, she went back to getting dressed.

Zidane laughed again. “You know you don’t have to rush. Beatrix came in and said she postponed your meetings till like a couple of hours from now and that what’s his face sent a message saying he wouldn’t arrive till evening. She agreed that you needed rest.”

“What?” she replied, stopping to look at him.

“You have at least a couple hours to get ready. I talked to Beatrix?”

Garnet let out an exasperated sigh, dropping her brush on her table. “You couldn’t have just told me that sooner?”

“Yea, I could have, but I love watching you freak out.” He said with an even bigger grin. “And getting dressed of course.”

She just shook her head but couldn’t hide a grin “What am I going to do with you?”

“Love me.” He replied smugly.

“Are you feeling back to normal?” She asked, a hint of worry returning to her face.

He rolled his shoulders and stretched. “Yea, and don’t try saying the doctors healed me, cus I know it was you. Beatrix told me you didn’t sleep at all, you shouldn’t have pushed yourself.”

She scowled at him. “If you had told me you were going somewhere, Steiner could have accompanied you and none of it might have happened, and you still have not explained what attacked you.”

In response he just flashed his trademark smile. “You always get that royal tone when you’re annoyed. It’s cute.”

....

About two hours later

“He should be arriving soon, your Majesty.”

“Alright.. I hope this goes well, we need all of the contributions we can get to help with the rest of the reconstructions.

“It will probably just be another formal introduction, so that he lets you know that the money is coming from him and that he wants respect. By the way, I know that it is not my business, but did that monkey ever tell you what happened to him?”

“Only part of it..” she sighed from the chair that she was sitting in.

“Is that what you are really worried about?” The older woman asked knowingly.

“.. I am sorry Beatrix, I just can’t help it. I have tried to ask him about it but he only told me part of what happened, and not how he got hurt. He just says that he doesn’t want me to worry, that I have enough things to worry about.”

“I suppose for once, he is right Your Highness, Do try to focus on the matters at hand. I am sure he

will be alright.” She stated, placing a hand on Garnet’s shoulder and giving her a reassuring smile.

“Thank you Beatrix.” She replied with a nod

The two women waited patiently in silence for the next few minutes, until finally the doors creaked open.

“Your Majesty, I must apologize for my tardiness.” The black haired man said, shutting the door behind him. He was about the same age and height as Zidane, but his short black hair was slicked back neatly on his head. He was lavishly and impeccably dressed. His grey suit and shoes had obviously been tailored just for the occasion. The skin that covered his well tone muscles was very pale but without blemish. To anyone but the young queen, who had slowly begun to greatly dislike nobles of the sort (Due in major part to Zidane’s influence, Steiner would swear.), he would have been the near picture perfection of a man.

“Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Damian.” He smiled. “I am certain our meeting will be most unforgettable.”

4. Fall of Alexandria Pt 1

As soon as he laid his eyes on the noble hurrying toward the castle, he could feel a great distaste for the man. He looked like other nobles he had seen. His hair was combed neatly and he wore an impeccable suit. Also like many other nobles, he glared at Zidane and the way he was sprawled out on the manicured lawn. What wasn't like the other nobles is that for a second, but only for a second, he thought he saw something that wasn't human at all

“Shit. Tell me that's not the rich guy that Dag's meeting with.” He said to himself while turning to hurry back to the castle. Maybe I was just seeing things? He doubted it. Now I just gotta get inside during the meeting without making it obvious that I'm on to him. First, I guess I'll have to see who's guarding the door. If it's Rusty, maybe I can convince him to let me in? Maybe if I explain it to him?

Zidane hurried down the corridor leading to the conference room. As he approached the door, he could already see Steiner's rusty armor standing at the ready. “Hey Rusty! Do you mind if i—”

“The queen is in a meeting. You know I cannot allow you to just barge in.” Steiner huffed, reading the boy’s thoughts.

“Look, I know. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. But, I think Dagger’s in real danger.”

“Nonsense!” Steiner bellowed. “The General has accompanied the Prin— Queen to the meeting.”

Zidane let out a dramatic sigh and grew impatient. “That’s good at least but still I—”

“Tribal!” a familiar voice yelled from the other end of the hallway.

Zidane quickly turned around facing the direction the voice had come from.

“Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Damian.” He smiled. “I am certain our meeting will be quite unforgettable.”

Garnet shifted in her chair, and glanced at Beatrix still standing, unmoved. “Um.. Nice to meet you Damian. My name is Garnet.” Something tells me this is going to be a long meeting. She thought. I wonder what Zidane is doing? Her mind drifted.

“I apologize if I came off a bit strong. As you will soon see, I am not all talk.” He laughed.

“What do you mean by that?” She asked cautiously, glancing in the general’s direction again. There was something off about this man although she couldn’t figure out what it was or why she felt that way. Beatrix stood to the side of the room where she couldn’t easily see her face, but she was sure Beatrix was eyeing him cautiously ready for anything he might attempt.

“Oh, do not worry, we will get to that your Highness. Firstly I would like to thank you for meeting with me. A man such as myself does not donate this amount of money to the kingdom’s restoration or any other cause for that matter, without having a face to put it to. I must say, your Majesty, what a beautiful face that is.”

“Thank you.” She replied. Despite her reservations about him, she couldn’t help but blush slightly at the blatant compliment. Maybe this man wasn’t up to anything more than any other nobleman after all?

“Are the stories true that you and your friends traveled the world, and in so doing fought great foes and saved us all from destruction?” he asked with a

bright smile. He walked over to the table and pulled out the chair at the end and sat down.

“Yes” she replied smiling at the memories. “It is true, but I could not have done any of it without the help of my friends and many others.” She added.

Damian propped his boots on the large conference table and leaned back in the chair, making himself comfortable. “You give yourself too little credit, your Majesty. From what I’ve been told, in your delicate hands, you hold the power to lay waste to entire kingdoms. You hardly needed the help of a washed up knight, a pitiable black mage or a heartbroken Burmecian, Let alone a sorry excuse for a thief.”

At this, Garnet stood up. She was shocked at the sudden change of his demeanor. It took her a few moments to register the condescension of his statement. When she did, she wished she had listened to her instincts. Alexandria needed this man’s money, but she refused to let the man insult the people she cared for. “How dare you!”

Instead of being surprised at her response, his sneer only became more menacing and gave her a deep feeling of dread. “I speak only the truth, Your Highness, or perhaps you are far weaker than I give

you credit for?” He shook his head, “Your oaf of a mother would be deeply ashamed. Then again, she may have been even more worthless.”

Her face grew red with anger as she stood and clenched her fists. “GET OUT! Don’t you dare talk about my mother! Now leave before I have you thrown in the dungeon!” she yelled.

“Oh please, don’t waste your breath.” He started sarcastically. “I have no intention of going anywhere. In fact I plan on making this my new home. I told you that I wanted to see Alexandria rise anew, bigger and better than ever, and I plan on doing just that.. Although I might have failed to mention that I plan on leveling it all to the ground, so that a new kingdom can rise, free of pathetic filth like you and your wretched friends.”

He then pulls a knife from his vest and pointed its tip menacingly at her.

“Do you really think you can just come in here and threaten me?”! Garnet exclaimed in disbelief. “Beatrix, throw this monster in the dungeon!”

He just smirked as he brought the tip of the blade to his lower lip.

It was then that she realized that Beatrix had not spoken up or interrupted him, even as he had blatantly insulted the others and talked of destroying Alexandria. She turned fully to look at the general and gasped when saw that she was staring at him blankly and motionless. “Beatrix..?” she asked hesitantly.

“I don’t believe she’s going to be throwing me in the dungeon any time soon, or taking any orders from the likes of you for that matter.”

She spun around to face him again. “What did you do to her!?”

“Nothing that she did not desire.” He grinned. “All I did was free her mind and allow her to see the truth. I would not worry about her, she will live a long life that is not polluted by the thoughts and worries of a mortal. You should be more worried about what SHE will do to YOU.”

Garnet took a step back toward the door leading out of the conference room. “All I have to do is yell, and this room will be full of guards” She said, trying to sound unintimidated.

“Go ahead, they won’t help you.” He taunted again, his voice causing a fear to well up inside of

her that even Kuja had been unable to do. “I have transported this room to.. let’s just say a quieter realm where you and I could talk without interruptions. Nothing can come in or leave this place unless I allow it, though I am certain that no one would waste their time with the likes of you. You’re nothing but a pretty face. As for the guards, In a matter of moments your precious kingdom will be reduced to rubble, and the guards that have not already joined me will sink into the ground with it.”

’You’re Lying! “she spat, backing up to the door but not taking her eyes from Damian. She backed up until her hands touched the cold metal for the door handles. She broke eye contact long enough to turn and pull the handles of the large door, but to her horror, the door did not budge.” Steiner! Guards! Zidane! “she yelled, trying desperately to get the door open.

“You are wasting your time, the precious little you have left. That door will never open, though you are welcome to keep trying. I find this game rather amusing.” He laughed. She turned around and glared at him, trying not to let her see how scared she was. If only I had my rod! She mentally cursed herself for not keeping it with her at all times. She hoped that it wouldn’t show, but it was taking a lot of effort not to

break down and cry. How could this be happening? How had her life went from being almost perfect to disaster again in only a few short moments? This was supposed to just be another boring meeting! “She tried to think of a way out of this, as Zidane had always managed to do, but her thoughts felt so distant from her and clouded in a dark fog.

A voice inside of her that she couldn’t explain wanted to just give in, and let him win. How bad would it be to not have to think or be responsible any more? “What is it that you want to do? Kill me?”

“No” he said blandly ‘what would be the fun in that?’ He got up from his seat and walked to the other end of the table and placed the knife where she had previously been sitting. He then looked up at her with another smile. “I am not going to do anything.” He then glanced at Beatrix then back at Garnet. “But then, It is not about what I am going to do, it is about what you will do.” He paused for a moment to give a devilish grin. “First, you are going to kill her... then you are going to kill yourself... I’m merely going to watch.”

Garnet gasped, shook from her head as it swam with cloudy thoughts and stared at the knife on the

table. "I..I wont."

"It's you!" Zidane startled as Rasler came into view. "Wait, shit! What are you doing here? It's because of that guy that's in there with Dagger isn't it?!" he asked, remembering their earlier conversation.

Steiner looked at him alertly. "Identify yourself! How dare you walk into this castle unannounced!" he yelled stomping furiously. "I supposed he is one of your thieving friends?!" he said shaking a fist at Zidane.

"I apologize for the interruption Captain, but we've no time to stand and talk. Zidane, you will come with me quickly." He then turned and started down the corridor. 'Steiner can come along as well, as long as he doesn't slow us down.' Steiner couldn't believe the nerve of this guy. "Slow you down?!" He growled." I'll have you know I am Captain of the knights of Pluto!"

"We do not have time for this. Come or don't. We must go NOW!" Rasler snapped.

“I can’t just leave!” Zidane exclaimed. ‘Whatever that thing is, is in there with Dagger!’ He pleaded, motioning toward the door. “How can you expect me to just leave her!? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“No. I am sorry, but it is too late for her. She was lost as soon as he entered the room.” Rasler stated coldly. “There is naught in there but an empty room, If you don’t believe me, look for yourselves but do it quickly.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Zidane slammed open the doors leading into the conference room. Steiner stood dumbfounded as the room was indeed empty, even the furniture had gone. “Dammit!” Zidane yelled, and turned toward Rasler. “Where is she?! You said the necklace would help her!”

“What happened to Beatrix and her Majesty?! What is going on?!” Steiner asked desperately.

Rasler groaned and walked back toward the two. “If she was wearing it, she should be fine unless he managed to negate its power. I told you not to rely on it. As for the other woman.. I do not know. Either way, I fear our fate may be worse than hers if we do not escape this castle quickly.” Rasler answered.

“What do you mean?”

I've told you already. Come with me and you will find out. Now hurry! I will not wait around for you any longer! This castle has already been taken over from the inside; It is lost! I refuse to stay and perish with it! "Rasler yelled at the two men, his patience gone.

"Dammit." Zidane kicked angrily. "Let's go Rusty, we can't do anything here." Steiner still wasn't sure what was going on, he didn't trust this man but he had learned to trust Zidane even if he did greatly enjoy giving him a hard time. So, he followed.

"Who is this man? And what is Happening?" he huffed to Zidane as they tried to keep up with Rasler, who headed quickly down the corridors. "His name is Rasler, it's a long story, but he saved my life. Even though he's an asshole, I think we can trust him."

"Dammit." Rasler stopped suddenly blocking the corridor with his arm. "Why'd we stop?" Zidane asked. It was then that he noticed one of the young hand maidens was standing in front of them blocking the path.

"Who are you and where are you going?" She asked innocently.

Steiner, recognizing her voice, was the one to respond. "It is none of your concern! I demand you leave the castle Immediately!" he yelled.

"I'm afraid I cannot do that." She said in a low sneer, her face growing more cynical. "I was instructed to kill anyone not serving my master."

She then pulled out a knife and charged at Rasler with a high pitched scream. Rasler pulled his sword from its sheath and quickly met her knife with his blade, sending the small blade hurdling across the room. The small woman grabbed her wrist and let out a dark growl.

"Tell your Master that you should have chosen someone stronger as your host." Rasler said as he walked toward the woman, his blade pointed at her throat. 'I know what you are, your kind does not deceive me, and I will not hesitate to end you.' The woman pulled another knife from behind her back. "I guess we will have to find out if you are capable of that." She hissed.

She then jumped toward them, almost to the ceiling, and brought the knife toward Rasler's head again. He quickly swung his blade upward with all his strength. It connected again, this time shattering the knife and cutting cleanly through her neck. Her

body fell lifelessly to the floor; Her head rolled down the concrete corridor leaving a trail of red in its path.

“What in the gods happened to her?! Steiner exclaimed, a horrified expression on his face.

Rasler turned toward him sheathing his blade. “Never hesitate. You must be ready to kill anyone that stands in our path, for they will have no remorse in doing the same.”

“You expect us to kill our own people!?” Steiner questioned as the reality of what was happening finally set in.

Rasler let out an exasperated sigh. “They are not ‘your people’ anymore. I believe most if not all of them have been dead for some time, and their souls have been replaced by those of fiends or demons.”

Zidane shook his head. “You weren’t kidding when you said things were gonna get bad. Surely some of them are still alive and human? There has to be something!”

“This is only the beginning. These creatures on their own are nothing. They merely possess the living and heighten their natural abilities. I am sorry, but we were too late. I believe we are the only ones

here that still possess our minds. But let us go, we can talk later.” They nodded solemnly in silent agreement, and hurried toward the castle entrance.

A moment later they arrived, only to find the door barred by two guards with the same demeanor as the girl. “I’m afraid we cannot let you pass.” They stated coldly. Zidane pulled out his dagger and quickly stood beside Rasler. “These guys are nothing; I’ll take the one on the right!” he yelled. Suddenly the great door was opened and in walked at least six more guards, many more coming in the distance.

“Shit.. so much for easy..” Zidane said, looking at Rasler.

“Is there a back way out of the castle? We cannot hope to fight them all!” Rasler responded.

Zidane looked back toward where they had come from. “Yea, follow me!” he exclaimed running back the way they had come.

The three men rushed toward the hidden passageway in the queen’s lounge that lead to the winding staircase with Zidane leading the way. As they reached the hallway in front of Garnet’s room (Brahne’s old chamber) Steiner stopped. He huffed

for breath a second before he spoke. “What manner of devilry is this?! I know these people! How could this have happened without us knowing?! The last one I killed was one of the head cooks!”

Rasler stopped and looked at him for a moment. “The evil that seeks to destroy us will use any manner of weakness we possess against us, and they have no care for their own lives.”

“Then let us stand and fight if they will not listen to reason!” he pleaded. “We have already killed half a dozen of them! How many more can there be?!” As if to answer his question, many footsteps could be heard coming toward them.

Rasler placed his hand on the man’s shoulder. “You are a strong and brave man Steiner, be do not let your loyalty blind you to the obvious! We have no hope of winning this day. This is not an attack on your kingdom; it is a victory. No doubt the enemy’s pawns have lied here in waiting for many months now, for they live to deceive!”

“Come on! We’ll figure everything out later!” Zidane yelled as a group of guards came around the corner. He slammed the door open to the lounge with Rasler and Steiner barricading the door behind them.

Upon entering the room, Zidane was the first to notice the girl hiding behind the large chair. Zidane looked at her hesitantly for a moment. “Are you ok? He asked slowly expecting a sudden attack.

“I..I am alright.. Please.. Please help me!..” she cried. “My.. My friends tried to attack me! I.. I have known them my whole life and they.. they were going to kill me! My best friend Talia!

Zidane relaxed a little as he listened to the girl. When she was finished, he was no longer wary of the girl, he just felt a deep sorrow for her. He had only been here a few weeks and hadn’t even learned everyone’s names. But yet, just seeing what was happening to these people, good people, was devastating. Seeing her also brought thoughts of Dagger. Gods, he hoped Rasler was right and that she was ok. “Hang in there Dag! I’ll find you!” he mentally shouted.

“Everything will be ok.” He finally replied. “We’ll get you out of here, just follow us.” Rasler and Steiner said nothing, but eyed the girl suspiciously. The girl nodded eagerly, and so Zidane opened the passage. A wave of heat poured out and they shared worried glances but began descending the staircase with the girl in tow.

“Where is this insufferable heat coming from?” Steiner asked, wiping the sweat from his forehead and peering over the edge of the winding stairs. He could see nothing, save for a slight glow near the bottom of the passageway.

“I believe it is coming from below the castle.” Rasler replied without stopping. “This castle was built atop a gateway, of which is now opening.” Steiner mumbled something under his breath, but said no more.

They soon reached the bottom of the staircase and stood on the platform in front of the room that Brahne had extracted Garnet’s Eidolons. “Those guards should have been right behind us.” Zidane stated, looking up. “I have a bad feeling about this..”

“Indeed you should.” The girl said quietly. The three men turned quickly toward her, reaching for their weapons. Before they could react, however, the girl punched Steiner, sending him skidding across the platform. ‘Your desire to help me will be your undoing.’ She laughed and looked at Rasler. “I know well who you are Zidane Tribal, and poor Adelbert, But I do not know your face nor do I know how you seem to know so much about us.”

“Tell your master if he wants to know more about me, he can come and find out for himself!” Rasler replied through gritted teeth.

“I don’t think that will be necessary since you will soon draw your last breath!” The girl barked, her voice changing and becoming much deeper. Steiner had not expected what happened next, as he picked himself up from the floor. The small girl’s skin expanded with great bubbles and cracks. Her chin seemed to drop below her chest. Her teeth became black and needle like. Spikes grew and jutted from her arms and legs; its lower arm and hand twisted and changed until it became a long blood colored blade, but it was its eyes that shook him the most. They were dark black pits of nothingness, as if you looked too long, you might get sucked in, never to return.

“What are you?” Rasler growled. ‘I.. am.. Death!’ It roared. “I live only to serve my master! And it is his will that will see your demise!”

With a dark laugh, the creature lunged its blade at Rasler’s chest, moving quickly, he used his sword to deflect the attack, however the blade still managed to cut into his left shoulder. Zidane saw his window of opportunity while it was distracted in its attack to

unleash an attack of his own, so he quickly swung his daggers and managed to drive one of his blades deep into the beasts stomach. It stumbled backward for a second and hissed.

As Zidane watched, the wound he had just dealt sealed itself closed. He looked to his left, and Steiner charged it from behind. He brought his sword down heavily and cut its left arm off, just above the creature's blade. "Way to go Rusty! Now it can't attack!"

"Do not be so certain!" Rasler yelled. He looked back toward the creature in time to narrowly miss the blade arm flying toward his head? "Dammit!" he yelled, diving to the ground in a roll.

Despite the fact that its arm was no longer attached, the creature didn't even seem to be injured or in pain. As the three men continued to attack, and delivered blow after blow, the creature still did not seem to tire. "This is fruitless!" Steiner yelled, blocking yet another attack. "We must try something else!"

"Then let us see how it handles this!" Rasler replied. He closed his eyes and began saying an incantation they were not familiar with.

“What is this!?” The creature bellowed stopping suddenly, as if bound.

“You say you are Death?” Rasler began, his blade beginning to glow with a white fire. ‘Then allow me to give your name meaning!’ Heaven’s Judgment rain down and seal this wretched soul! “When he opened his eyes, they glowed with the same fervor as his blade. Zidane could feel the power radiating from his direction.” Judgment Blade!” He yelled, swinging his sword in the monster’s direction.

Immediately, the light passed from Rasler, through the tip of his blade, and began shining intensely above the beast. In only a few short seconds, the air was split with a loud shattering noise, and the creature was engulfed completely in a blinding light. This was followed by a blood curdling scream that filled the room. As the light faded, the creature was no more.

5. Journey to Burmecia

The rains did not slacken. The water beat and hammered against the trodden path, turning it to a muddy slosh. If the rain and mud wasn't bad enough, the wind that blew it in a shameless onslaught was almost too much to bear, although Ramza had had little choice in the matter as the wind had blown the tattered tent to ribbons, and so with begrudged determination he pressed onward toward his destination. He could see what was left of Cleyra in the distance, but the pale grey walls of Burmecia seemed to blend into the mountain. Even though he could not see it, he was certain he would be there within a day, unless the weather had its say and it very well might.

“Surely this onslaught cannot be natural!” Ramza exclaimed, struggling to shield his face. ‘Ever since we arrived, something has seemed unsettling about this place..’ He moved his hand to his forehead and tried to see if he could see anything that didn't fit in with the surroundings, but everything looked pale, saturated by the onslaught of rain. “Where are all of the monsters?.. Even a path as well trodden as this one should have at least a few weak monsters

hunting for food. Perhaps the rain drove them away?”

As if to answer his question, the ground began to shake.

“What’s this? He asked to himself as he struggled to maintain his balance in the slippery mud. He let out a groan as something began to rise from the mud a few yards ahead of him. It slowly turned from a misshapen mound to something resembling a golem with dark black eyes and body that seemed to simply be made of mud.” Though I was looking for signs of monsters that was certainly not an invitation! “Ramza yelled as he readied his sword.

The creature swung its large dripping arm at him as he tried with great difficulty to avoid its attack. Each time he tried to pull his feet from the mud, the mud relentlessly tried to pull him back. Luckily the beast was slow enough that even with the added difficulty he was able to break free of the mud and avoid the attack. He then swung his sword at what he thought to be its head, only for his blade to become uselessly embedded in the ever-changing mud that made up the creature. With effort he pulled his blade free and quickly distanced himself from the mud beast. “Damn! My weapon is useless!

Perhaps if I can harden the mud I can damage it!” He said to himself, then remembering the necessary incantations, he cast “Blizzara”. The air popped and seemed to hang, as the very rain was frozen in place by the force of the spell. After only a moment, the creature was frozen solid, and showed no signs of trying to break free.

Tentatively, Ramza approached the creature and touched the ice with the tip of his sword. He had expected to be met with resistance, but as soon as the blade made contact, the ice and the creature within shattered into small shards. There were no signs that it was trying to reform. “Huh?” he quipped with astonishment. “That was not nearly as bad as I had feared. Perhaps my magic has gotten stronger?”

He sheathed his thin blade, and looked around. He hardly minded the rain after having won his small victory. However, his relief was short lived. As he looked, his smile dropped and was replaced by a look of worry. The creature he had killed was indeed no more, but as he looked on dozens more were now forming from the wet earth. “Why can it never just be easy?” Ramza commented.

After a moment of watching the misshapen mounds rise from the mud, he decided it would be better to just flee because he knew he would only be able defeat so many. So, he turned and tried to run toward Burmecia. His legs burned as he ran through the thick mud. He was stopped at what had to have been every few feet by a pack of the “Mud Golems” as he decided to call them. They just kept coming! He cast blizzard after blizzard trying to reach the city, but as he approached its great walls, he could feel his magic running out. He cursed that he had not restocked ethers at Lindblum but he had not expected having trouble reaching Burmecia. He knew that now he would surely pay for his mistake.

“Dammit!” Ramza yelled, slashing his blade at the nearest golem and trying to back away toward the city. “This is useless, if only I had an Ether!” With every swipe of his sword, he tried to take another step back, but the slippery mud made quick movements impossible.

So, even with his defensive tactics, the golems were constantly within striking distance. He feared it would only be a matter of time before he was cornered and he would be forced to use the stone... But he could not afford to risk using it. The price that came with using the stone was far greater than

just having the enemy know its whereabouts. Rasler had been far too careless bringing back the boy. He understood why he had done it, but surely it would haunt him in ways only their great power could. All of the stones had been lost and scattered, save for the ones they possessed. Individually, their true power was far more than any man should possess, but together they had all of the power of the gods. They had used that power once.. It had been enough to save the world but the cost..

No, he thought, I can't afford to use it yet, not now. So he kept slashing at the creatures. With each blow he cut off one of their mud limbs, but each of them continued to grow back in only a short moment. This continued until his arms shook from merely holding his blade. "Ugh! I've no choice!" he yelled, reaching into a pouch at his waist to retrieve the stone that he had not wished to use.

As he grasped the stone, Lightning split the air and crashed into the golem before him. Suddenly, as if falling from the sky itself, a rat-like woman covered in red stood before him.

"You looked like you could use a little help." she smirked. "What do you say we get out of here while we can?"

“Gods! You must be the one called Freya! To say I am happy to see you would be an understatement! These fiends only seem to be injured by magic, and mine is exhausted.” Ramza replied, relieved.

Freya quickly pulled an ether from her pack and tossed it to Ramza. “Here! You seem to know who I am.” She started while attacking another golem. “But who are you? And where did these creatures come from?”

Ramza quickly downed the ether and began destroying the golems again by casting Blizzara on all of the ones nearby. “More of them will surely come! Let us hurry and go to Burmecia and I will explain all I know!” Freya gave him a nod, and the two hurried toward the city, destroying all of the golems in their path.

When they finally reached the city they turned to look and see how many golems would surely come in the city, but when they looked, there was no trace that there had been any golems at all save for the loose mud that covered the plains. “Why did they just stop?” Ramza wondered aloud.

“I was hoping you could tell me.” Freya replied. “Until a few days ago I had never seen anything like them before.”

“I’m afraid I have never seen their like either.” Ramza said, trying to catch his breath after their trek through the mud. “My name is Ramza, thank you for your help. It was beginning to look grim for me.”

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment before responding. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard of you, Ramza, but you do seem very capable in a fight. Are you from around here?’ As they talked they walked to a nearby shelter so they would have a little protection from the onslaught of rain.

“No, I’m... From a place very far from here, I’m afraid I cannot tell you exactly where I came from, at least not yet. Just know that I am not your enemy.”

Freya continued to study him for a moment. “Can you at least tell me why you’ve come here?”

“Regent Cid sent me to warn you of a darkness coming, I believe those creatures were a small part of it, but much stronger foes are coming. I cannot say how I know this without sounding crazy, but around two thousand years ago, when this world was first called Gaia, before a catastrophe happened, it went by another name.”

As he continued, he began to stare off in the distance. “At that time the world almost ended, much of it was destroyed and entire continents were changed, but after a long struggle, even though the darkness was not destroyed, it was able to be sealed away. We have tried to keep the seal from breaking and strengthen it, but the destruction that recently happened caused by Kuja and Garland only served to weaken the seal to a point beyond recover.”

“Where is this seal?” she asked, after letting all the information sink in.

“Under Alexandria.” He answered simply.

“Alexandria!” Freya gasped. ‘We must warn them!’ Ramza shook his head. “My friend should be there already, though even he may be too late. I think it would be best if I could speak with the king of Burmecia.”

“Then let’s not waste time.” She replied, and hurried toward the palace. He groaned at the rain and followed after her.

Upon their arrival it took no time for them to be granted an audience with newly appointed king. (Prince Puck was not yet ready to take the throne.) He repeated to the king all that he had said to Freya,

and she recounted her experience in the fields. “I’m inclined to believe that you’re telling the truth, but what can we hope to do against an army of fiends!? The king of Burmecia exclaimed.” Our forces were all but wiped out when Brahne and her black mages destroyed Clerya and our kingdom! We scarce have enough people left to rebuild!”

Ramza looked at him thoughtfully “If we all join with Lindblum within their castle walls, we may be able to resist them.”

“I don’t know if it will do any good, but anything is better than doing nothing.” Freya remarked. “Is there anything else that you can tell me that might help us? He asked Ramza. Ramza told the king that the mud golems were more than likely shapeless spirits from the underworld, and that as the seal continued to break, more and more fiends would come forth seeking to destroy all life until there was nothing left.

He asked what the seal was, and Ramza explained the best he could with leaving out only a few details that he felt were necessary. The Underworld had been opened two thousand years ago, with it came plagues and fiends beyond his imagination. The dark forces destroyed most of the

world, even changing the continents themselves. However, A group of people had finally been able to send the fiends back and seal the gate with the help of strong magic and stones of even greater power.

“What happened to these stones of power you spoke of?” The king asked.

“I’m afraid I cannot say.” He replied.

“Cannot say, or will not say? If you do not trust us,” the King commented motioning to Freya. “How then can we be expected to trust you?”

Ramza frowned in thought for a few long moments before replying. “I cannot say what happened to all of them, only that I possess one. I do know the whereabouts of another, though I cannot say where it is, for fear of who might be listening. I suspect the other ten of them may be in the underworld itself. Although they may also be hidden in places such as this one. Even though we do not know where they are, the stones seem to draw toward each other so we should be able to find them, or at least the Lucavi that come from them.”

“You have one of them?!” he asked in disbelief. Freya also shared a look of surprise. “May we see it?”

“I still find it hard to believe that Alexandria could have fallen so quickly, can we not go to them for aid? The queen has great powers of summoning that would surely aid us, not to mention the power of their remaining soldiers as well! Can we not go to them?

“No.” Ramza replied. “Alexandria has surely already fallen.”

6. Fall of Alexandria Pt 2

“I... I wont do it.” Garnet said, shaking her head.

Damian grinned and walked over to Beatrix. “Oh, you will... If you want to live that is. Otherwise, my lovely new servant will be more than eager to end your pathetic life.” He then raised his hand and stroked Beatrix’s cheek. “Isn’t that right love?”

Garnet watched in horror with her small hands covering her mouth as Beatrix turned toward her and drew her sword. “Yes, master.” She replied in a distant, hazy voice. “It would be my greatest pleasure.”

“Beatrix! Please!.. It’s me, Garnet!..” She pleaded and backed up a few steps as Beatrix took a step toward her. “You can fight this! You are not just my general; you have always been like a sister to me. Please, you must resist him!”

Damian broke out into a cruel laugh. “Go on, beg for your life! Perhaps then we would let you join us? I can make you stronger than ever before, you could even be my bride! Together we could rule this world! I can take away your pain, your fears and

sorrow at having been abandoned. I can make it so that you feel nothing of this world's torment! You would no longer have to cater to the whims of noblemen or your so called friends. Even now, they have abandoned you and care nothing for your wellbeing. They have seen the truth; that they are far better off without you. Do you truly wish to stay a weak helpless girl when you could be a god!?"

"... I would rather die than marry you!" She replied coldly. "My friends would never abandon me. You are nothing but a monster, twisting truth into lies!"

"Oh but they have, Dear. I can hear my servants at the castle, and it seems your bumbling fool of a captain, the tailed street urchin, and another man whose identity eludes me only for the moment are fleeing the castle as we speak. They were right outside of the door, and they did not even bother to try to help you

"W-what are you talking about?" she stammered glancing back and forth from Beatrix and Damian, trying to keep her distance from them both.

"Precisely what I said." He replied. "They are leaving the castle without you. They do not care about you Garnet, not the way that I do. As soon as

danger presented itself they turned tail and fled. They didn't even bother to see if you were still in the room or not, perhaps they were waiting for an opportunity to be rid of you?"

"They.. They would not do that. Especially not Zidane." She said shaking her head. Her thoughts swam much worse than before and in a way she felt as though she were watching a strange play. What if he was telling the truth? After all, it made a lot of sense didn't it? "He would never just leave me, and he will stop you." She heard herself saying. Why was she defending him? It seemed so pointless.

Damian stopped grinning and sneered. "I wouldn't be so sure if I were you, from what I hear, he was the one leading the way out. Did you ever think that maybe he did not care for you at all, but as a commoner, wanted only the power and money that comes with being a king? As for the others, do not worry one my most loyal servants is waiting for them, and I am aware of how strong they are, but she will have no trouble in killing them all. They are no doubt too stupid to use real magic, so even if they are indeed very strong they will scarcely scratch her. Once she is finished with them, you will be stuck here all alone as you have always been, well except for us that is." He grinned again.

Garnet's thoughts steadied again as she thought of her friends being killed. She didn't know why but she knew if they fought it would be a hopeless slaughter. It would be pointless to even try, there was no doubt about that fact now. “..Please leave them alone.. Do what you will to me, but let them go!”

“Even after they abandon you and left you for dead? you would still trade your safety for theirs? And for such a weak girl, you will address me properly.” he remarked sadistically. “What are you thinking love? Do you not know how to act around royalty?”

As the tears fell, she still tried to stand tall. “Please.. your Excellency.”

“How pathetic.” He laughed. “Sorry love, they should already be dead by now. My servant should be bringing me the lovely details of their execution any minute!”

She felt her last resistance come crashing down in an instant and she had every intention of bowing before him and apologizing for being rude to him. But as she began to do so a voice shot into her mind. “*Hang in there Dag!*” There was no doubt who it had come from and just like that, the veil had been

lifted from her. In a moment of panicky desperation, Garnet darted over to the table and grabbed the knife. “I would never kill Beatrix.. but I WILL kill you!” she yelled through tears of rage.

“I think not.” He chuckled. With a wave of his hand the knife was yanked from hers and went scattering across the floor. “Do you truly think I would come here if I thought you could ever come close to harming me? I don’t know how you escaped my grasp, but it does not matter. Besides, I still want to have a little fun. Beatrix, love? Why don’t you tell the queen why you would enjoy killing her?”

Garnet turned sharply toward Beatrix, and found her grinning. “Oh I’ve thought about killing her many times.”

“He’s making you say that!” She yelled.

Beatrix gave her a mean glare before continuing. “Do you really think I would let myself be controlled? You are a weak, helpless little girl who can’t get over the death of her mother. Always riding on the strength of others just to get by. I’m surprised you can even walk without help. Let alone run a kingdom. You are not even the real Garnet, just a regular commoner, you taint the throne with just your presence.”

“You don’t mean that..” She said softly. She tried not to let the words sting, but she couldn’t help it. “He’s making you say those things..”

“I meant every word.” Beatrix replied. ‘Why do you think I gave into his power so quickly?! I’ve desired this for years. We talk about that common thief you are in love with, but you are worth even less than he. At least he is strong and is actually good at something! What are you good for!?’ Beatrix hissed. “Truth be told, had you not been made into queen, I would think more highly of one of the servants than you. I loathe every moment that I am forced to spend in your presence!”

“I..I” she started, but the words wouldn’t come.

“You are nothing but a burden to everyone you meet, you say that you helped save the world, but all you ever did was ride on the coattails of others! Every decision you have ever made on your own has been a disaster, and I am certain that the only reason that wretched thief even came back here is because he knew you are too weak to make it on your own, and that the kingdom would have been doomed under your guidance! The only good thing you could ever accomplish is dying!”

Garnet had tried so hard to be strong, but at her hateful words that just kept coming, the young queen fell to her knees again and sobbed. What if Beatrix was right? Every time she tried to be strong and make the right choices, she had always failed.. when she had tried to help her mother, when she had tried to protect Lindblum, and even when she had been so weak that she had lost her voice though everyone else was suffering just as much. What if Zidane and the others had left her on purpose?... maybe they really would be better off if she just...

Damian stood in front of her smugly. “Yes, stay on your knees where you belong, like the pathetic excuse for a queen you are. You are not worth keeping alive. Are you? If you have any dignity left, or if you ever had any, you will tell the good general to kill you yourself.”

This time she didn’t defend herself. She just looked up at as the tears poured and very quietly spoke. “I... I’m sorry Zidane... you.. deserve someone better than me.... And I.. I’m sorry you had to put up with me.. I....” She watched as Beatrix moved directly in front of her. She did not move as Beatrix lifted her sword in the air. “Zidane..” Garnet whispered as Beatrix quickly and angrily thrust the blade toward her queen’s heart.

...

“What in hell was that?!” Zidane exclaimed, trying to catch his breath. “At least we finally killed it!” he realized it was taking him longer to regain his composure than he had expected; he wondered if maybe he had not completely healed from the last creature that had attacked him.

He looked toward Rasler who merely shrugged and continued wrapping a piece of cloth around his shoulder that had been injured in the fight. “I do not have all the answers, Tribal. You may think I am an all knowing lord of wisdom and power, but I have neither great wisdom, nor indomitable power. I do not know where the creature went, but my attack surely would have only wounded it and I feel my magic has been drained far more than it should have been.”

“You mean that monstrosity is still alive?!” Steiner finally interrupted the conversation. ‘and you! You still have not explained what is happening!?’ He began to stomp toward him, but as he did so, the concrete below his feet suddenly broke away. “Ahhhh!” he yelped as he fell, but managed to keep from plunging into hole completely by outstretching his arms, and with a great deal of effort

he finally lifted himself from the hole. “Hot, Hottttt!” he yelled rolling away from the hole.

Zidane watched in dis-belief as steam began to bellow from the hole, the cracks growing gradually from where they had been. The once smooth concrete looked more like shattered glass now, than anything else. “Rusty come on! We gotta get outta here before this whole place collapses!”

He scrambled to his feet, and the group ran toward the Gargant tunnel. As they ran through the tunnel, sounds of concrete collapsing filled the air. Resulting shockwaves from the collapsing castle caused rocks to begin falling from the ceiling around them. “Where in the hell is that damnable Gargant!? Steiner yelled through the rumble, the heat becoming neigh unbearable.

“It seems we do not have time to wait! Run!” Rasler yelled, jumping from the platform. Zidane and Steiner did not see any reason to argue, so did likewise. They ran as best they could, but the heat and humidity did not lend to their flight, and thus, they were drenched in sweat and exhausted by the time they were halfway to Treno.

“Fuckin’ Finally! The heat seems to be going down! Zidane huffed thankfully, wiping his face

with his arm. Behind him, Steiner fell to his knees.” Hey! Are you alright? “he asked.

“Alright!? How could I Possibly be alright?!” He responded not looking up from the ground, and began hitting the hardened ground of the tunnel with his metal covered fist. “What kind of knight abandons his kingdom!? We left her Majesty and General Beatrix in the hands of some dark fiend and a collapsing castle! We have abandoned everything and fled! What kind of cowards are we?” he cried.

“It is not cowardice to flee from a battle you have no hope of winning. Only a fool fights a battle that is long lost. In truth, it took me most of my life to learn that lesson, even then, I often find myself the fool.” Rasler replied, trying to be comforting. ‘We flee today, so that we may regroup to fight back another day. Things that are already done cannot be so easily undone, all we can do is make the best of them.’ He then looked at Zidane, who also seemed to be in turmoil but was much better at not showing it. “Where does this tunnel go? I know naught of it.”

Zidane did not answer for a moment, but finally responded, though he did not look at him. “It goes to Treno, to Dr. Tot’s house. We should be safe there.”

“Good. Then let us keep moving, who knows what follows us?” He replied, looking through the fog.

“I don’t normally agree with Rusty, but how in the hell do you expect us to act like nothing happened? Don’t you give a damn about anybody? What about Dag? Beatrix? Hell even Quina?” He felt bad that he had almost forgotten about the bumbling chef. What had happened to it? What about all the other people in the kingdom? Were they still alive?

Rasler looked at the ceiling and ran his hand absentmindedly along the hilt of the knife on his belt. “It may be cold or cruel to you, but I have found in times of great peril, you must not become too attached to anyone or anything, if you do, the enemy will often use them against you. I know it is not an easy thing to do, but in this life we must do many things that aren’t easy. So, I choose a path, and do not stray from it no matter the costs. As for whether or not I care for your precious queen or Alexandria, there are far more important concerns in my mind than those. Either way, Alexandria’s fall was inevitable.”

“Geez, Would you listen to yourself?! You sound almost as bad as the thing we just fought!” Zidane responded exasperatedly.

Rasler did not reply. He merely turned and continued walking toward their destination.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re an asshole?!” Zidane yelled at his retreating form. ‘Dammit..’ He started after a moment. “I guess we better follow him.”

7. Struggle in Treno

The next few days following Alexandria's destruction, Zidane and his two companions had arrived at Treno uneventfully, save for the bouts of tremors that seemed to come from the direction of the castle. Ramza, with Freya's help, managed to convince the king and the people of Burmecia to go to Lindblum and take up arms with Regent Cid, so that they might live, even though they hated leaving their home. Even though three days had passed, there had been no sign of Garnet or Beatrix and no word from Alexandria. Nor were there any more attacks that they were aware of, even the mud golems had not reappeared.

"For the last time, I do not know what has happened to them!" Rasler snapped. He and Steiner were sitting at a small table near the item shop in Treno as Zidane paced angrily beside them. "I do not claim to know everything!"

"I could have stayed at the castle!" Zidane yelled, and grabbed Rasler's shoulder tightly, making him wince. "I could have found a way to help her, but no! I left her alone because I trusted you!"

Rasler glared at him and grabbed Zidane's arm. "Watch it Tribal. You need to control your anger!" Instead he yanked his arm free and only became angrier.

"Control my anger?! Dagger is probably dead because of you, you son of a bitch!" He yelled, swinging to hit Rasler in the face. He would have expected him to block him, but it was Stiener that stopped his swing.

"I worry for Her Majesty and Beatrix as well, but what could we have possibly done?" Steiner grunted. "I no longer believe it is his fault, if he hadn't helped us we would be dead too.. Those things.. Whatever they are, they took everything from us! We wouldn't even have known it, until it was too late. We need to calm down and figure out what to do next." He finished softly.

Zidane backed up a step. "I can't believe you're just giving up on them! What in the hell is wrong with you rusty?!"

He released the thief, but didn't answer him.

At last, Rasler spoke up. "I'm sorry Tribal, but I do not know why the necklace failed. Many of my

endeavors have not went the way I had hoped. Do you know why I fight, Zidane?

“Because you enjoy it? He answered bitterly.

“No, despite what you may think of me, I take no pleasure in this fight. I’m not evil. But at the same time, I don’t do it for the good of others as you do.”

“Then why?” he asked, his voice portraying curiosity instead of bitterness this time.

Rasler’s face held a look of shame for a moment. “There used to be people, things, i cared for but because of my sins as much or more than the sins of others, Fighting is all I have left.”

Zidane’s mood sobered a little at his statement,

“So, I know things seem bleak, but do not let your anger cause you to lose what still have. We do not know that they are dead, so unless we know otherwise we will assume Queen Garnet and her general made it out somehow and move on.” Rasler finished firmly.

“Alright.” He finally relented.

“Zidane!?” Stiener whispered in hushed panic.

“What is it Rusty?” he ask, both he and Rasler turning toward him

“Where did all of the people go?..” Steiner asked quietly. At this statement, both of them turned and looked around wildly.

“What the hell? They were here a second ago..” Zidane commented, his quenched anger now replaced with uncertainty as he subconsciously moved his hand to his dagger on his worn belt.

“How did I not notice that they had gone?..” Rasler breathed, drawing his weapon. “How could we not have seen so many people leave? Have I gotten so foolish?” having been on edge already, both Zidane and Steiner quickly drew their weapons as well.

“Anyone there!?” Steiner called, his voice echoing, but there came no reply. The wind could be heard blowing around the buildings, but no voices or footsteps could be heard. If they hadn’t seen the people with their own eyes, they would have sworn the place had been deserted for quite some time. They had smelled food cooking, and pipe weed from an old man nearby, but now it seemed even the smells had left entirely. “Are we losing our minds?” Steiner asked.

Zidane turned to say something to Rasler, but noticed that he was staring blankly and had grown very pale to the point that he looked almost deathly sick. His sword that he held in his right hand looked as if it might fall to the ground at any moment. But more than that, it seemed as though he might stop living at any moment. Hadn't he been perfectly fine a moment ago? "Rasler..?" he asked hesitantly.

He did not answer him, but instead spoke to seemingly himself "I.. I don't belong... my.. my time is long passed. Death is waiting.. Death welcomes me.. If I just let go I..."

"Rasler!" Zidane yelled, shaking him. "Snap out of it!"

After only a few seconds, he did snap out of it. When his eyes refocused he nearly collapsed onto the ground and was sweating profusely and struggling to regain his breath as his color returned to him. He knew what his ailment was, but he did not know why it had happened so quickly and affected him so severely...

"What the hell just happened to you?" Zidane asked. "Are you alright?"

“I’m fine..” He replied weakly. “I do not know what has happened to these people, but what happened to me is something I have no choice but to deal with, though I do not know what brought it on so suddenly. I fear we are about to find out and have much greater troubles. Do you feel the darkness and dread surrounding us?”

They all felt it. The air was so thick with dread, you could almost cut it with a knife. Rasler recollected himself and readied his sword again as two shrill voices cut through the tense air. “HEHE, They fell for our trick!” one of the voices laughed. “Fell for our trick they did!” the other trilled.

As Rasler watched bewilderedly, two short creatures dressed as court jesters came dancing into view. “They are very stupid.” Said the first, “Very stupid they are” Chimed the second.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Zidane remarked, shaking his head. “Not these guys again..”

“What are they?” Rasler asked.

“It’s Zorn and Thorn! I thought we killed these bastards already!”

“You did kill us.” “Kill us you did.”

“Then how are you here?!” Zidane yelled

“Our new master brought us back to kill you, he did.” “To kill you, brought us back to life he did. HeHe!”

“Your new master?” Steiner asked.

“Yes, who is this master you speak of?” Rasler jumped in. “Surely if he is strong enough to bring you back to life, he could come kill us himself?”

“He has more important things to do!” “More important things to do he has!”

“We killed you last time! What makes you think we can’t do it again?!” Zidane sneered.

“This time we have help. HeHe!” “This time, have help we do! HeHe!” From behind the two jesters came what appeared to be the same monstrosity that they had fought in Alexandria, although this time, it’s skin seemed to be bulging and moving as if something were moving inside of it. The odor coming from it was gaseous and smelled of rotting flesh. It smiled a disgusting smile and spoke. “We meet again, You might not recognize me, I’ve changed quite a bit since we’ve had our last fun!”

“Go to hell!” Zidane yelled. “What did you do to Dagger?! Where is she?!”

The creature looked puzzled for a moment, the three men couldn’t tell if it was thinking about it, or if it were merely surprised at being yelled at. It could have simply forgot what it was doing; they wouldn’t have put it past it. Finally Zorn and Thorn looked up at it as said in unison “He means the stupid queen!” “The stupid queen he means!”

“How dare you talk about the princess like that!” Steiner yelled angrily.

“Huummmnnn..” The creature started loudly “She should be dead by nowwww, unless the boss had other plans for herrr. But if she is deaaaad, you needn’t worry. You will be joining her soooon enough! I was strong last time we met, but as soon as I absorb these two...” It grabbed the two jesters and lifted them both off the ground. The flailed around trying to escape, but it was useless. “I will be Muccchhh stronger!” The fiend then pulled its arms inside of its body, along with Zorn and Thorn.

Nothing seemed to happen at first, but then the creature began to change, a multi-colored jester outfit seemed to mold itself around it, its head became more elongated, and its body went from

resembling a blob to a creature that resembled a man except that its legs were almost as thin as a broomstick, and it seemed to have no arms.

Steiner laughed. “It actually looks like it’s gotten a lot weaker!”

“Do not let its looks deceive you! I sense a great deal of power coming from it!” Rasler warned.

The creature smiled a more devilish smile, and said in a much more shrill voice: “You should listen to your friend. Hehe. Although is he truly your friend? As for the people you asked me of, I had already consumed them. Such pitiable humans, they barely even put up a fight!”

Zidane let out an angry growl.

“Oh it is such fun chatting with you, but unfortunately it is time that I kill you all! I would simply consume you, but I fear you would not settle well.. Oh welllll. Hehe!”

“We’ll see about that! We’re gonna kick your ass!” Zidane yelled, readying himself for battle. Steiner stood at the ready next to him, sword drawn, ready for whatever this thing was capable of. Rasler also looked ready to attack, but if they had looked closer, they would have noticed that his sword was

being held by tired shaky hands. What had happened to him earlier had left him very weak, and if he was being honest, he really hoped Steiner and Zidane would be able to defeat it on their own. If they couldn't.. He'd have no choice..

The creature lunged at Zidane, swinging its narrow leg (that now looked more like a blade) at his neck. He hadn't expected it to be that quick. Luckily for me, he thought as he ducked just in time and swung his dagger at its chest, I'm pretty damn fast too. It squealed and backed up. For a moment they all thought that maybe this thing was a pushover? However, the creature simply started laughing. "Knives? I can play with knives!" That watched with hesitation as knives appeared out of thin air and began to circle it. "Who should I stick first? Hehe!"

"You won't be doing anything!" Steiner yelled. "Thunder slash!" and swung his large sword. Lightning struck all around the fiend, and it hissed in anger and pain. It threw the knives at Zidane, who managed to again avoid the worst of the attack, and it then sent a Thundaga spell at Steiner, who wasn't quick enough to avoid it, but mostly seemed to be alright. The creature had been focused on attacking them, and gave Rasler an opportunity to attack it from behind. He stabbed his sword through its chest

hoping to kill it. He shoved his blade into its chest with everything had.

The creature screamed again, but instead of collapsing it swung and knocked Rasler into a nearby wall, leaving him barely conscious. The creature turned back, only to be met with attacks from both Zidane and Steiner. It let out a high pitched squeal and vanished in a puff of smoke. The two men stood panting and both were thanking the gods the creature was gone.

“Hehe” the voice laughed sinisterly, seemingly out of nowhere. “You didn’t think it would be that easy did you?”

“Oh Shit..” Zidane breathed, and from the look on Steiner’s face, the feeling was mutual.

“There are more of you, than there are of me... that isn’t fair! ..is it?! With another puff of smoke, the creature was back again, and appeared to be unscathed.” LET’S SEE HOW U LIKE IT! “It yelled, its voice growing and distorting. It began splitting at the head with horrific crunching and ripping sounds, and within seconds, two of them stood before them. The two creatures did likewise, until there were four of them, then eight.

Zidane and Steiner tried attacking the creatures while this was happening, but their attacks were all but useless. Rasler was still struggling to stand from his impact with the wall, and had a look of grim resolve as he saw the creature multiplying.

“Damnit! How the hell are we supposed to fight that many of them!? We were barely beating one!” Zidane yelled, not doing a very good job at hiding the fear in his voice.

“Forgive me Beatrix.. I believe this is the end for us..” Steiner said softly, readying his sword again.

After it had multiplied to eight, there creatures began to circle them, laughing tauntingly. “HeHe! Hehe! Hehe! You couldn’t beat one! Killing you now will barely be enjoyable!” They each began chanting the incantation to cast Thundaga, aiming to kill them quickly. Rasler desperately ran toward them, stumbling along the way.

“I hope you have an idea on how to kill these bastards or we’re screwed!” Zidane said as Rasler stopped next to him.

“Let us fight together!” Steiner yelled. “If we are to lose, let us die fighting together!”

“I have no intention of losing to this fiend!” Rasler yelled. ‘If I am to die, I’ll take them all with me!’ From his vest he pulled a green stone. At first it was pale and dull, but as Rasler spoke in a language they couldn’t understand, the stone began to pulse with light. “If I do not survive this, do not let this world fall into their hands! You must find a way to stop them!” He finished speaking the foreign words and raised the stone as the duplicated fiends cast their spells toward him.

There was a brilliant explosion of light, sending wave after wave of energy in all directions. Zidane and Steiner shielded their eyes, but were knocked backward by the waves of energy. The light from the blast could have been seen from the outer continent. As the light faded, many nearby buildings had been bleached white by its energy. With their eyes still burning, Zidane and Steiner looked around. There was nothing, save for the green stone where Rasler had stood.

8. Unexpected Reunion

“What just happened?! How could they all have just disappeared?” Steiner asked, his voice again echoing through the empty town.

Zidane seemed to not hear him and did not answer, but walked to where Rasler had stood and picked up the green stone that lay on the ground. As he picked it up, it glittered in the moonlight for a moment, but then went dull and cold to the touch. “Could this stone really be that powerful?” he asked distantly, staring at it.

“Perhaps all of its power has been used?” Steiner replied. “It seems like a regular stone to me. Do you think it is the cause of this?”

“No. I don’t know what Rasler did, or if all the power came from the stone. I am pretty sure that this stone is very important though.” He looked deeply into the stone. “I just hope it can help bring Dagger back.”

“Maybe we do not need to bring them back!” Steiner protested.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“They may not even be in danger! Why should we trust that lunatic we’ve been traveling with?”

“Do you really believe that!?”

“I.. I.. if they are in danger who is to say he is not the one to blame!” Steiner growled. “None of this started happening till he showed up!”

Zidane shook his head “look, I know what I said earlier but I don’t think he’s behind all of this. But what does it matter? Dag’s gone Steiner! and so is Beatrix! We can pretend it isn’t true, but it won’t change anything! And who cares if Rasler is on our side or not? All that matters is getting them back and stopping the ones that did this, and if it turns out Rasler is one of them, I’ll kill him too!” Steiner began to say something in response but instead fell silent.

“Let’s go Rusty.” Zidane said as he started walking away.

“Where?” he replied, not noticing Zidane was already leaving.

He was heading for Lindblum. He wanted answers, and Rasler had said that his friend would probably be there by now. So, he would get answers one way or another. Friend or foe be damned. And

so, the pair started making their way toward Lindblum. Neither of which felt like talking.

...

“Has there been any news from Alexandria? Surely there must have been some word from Zidane, Garnet, or Steiner?” Freya asked worriedly. She, Ramza, The King of Burmecia, and Eiko were all standing in the conference room looking expectantly at Regent Cid. “I fear what Ramza has told us about Alexandria has been confirmed. Our scouts have reported a lone black structure slowly rising from the ground where the castle once stood.” He said solemnly.

At his news, Eiko seemed shocked, as if she had hoped it was all just a story. The Regent continued. “Our scouts were not able to get close enough to it to see if anyone were still alive there, but the heat that was coming from it would suggest that it would not be possible for any human to survive. Unfortunately, there were also no signs of anyone fleeing the area and even the outlying city was ablaze.” Most everyone let out a disappointed sigh, save for Eiko.

She turned toward Ramza and glared at him accusingly. “You said they would be safe with your

friend!”

Ramza blinked at her stupidly for a moment and raised his hands before stammering “I.. We should have heard something from them by now. I don’t know why we...”

“You Lied!” Eiko yelled, pointing “You probably caused all of this didn’t you!? We don’t even know anything about you! I bet you’re just a no-good rotten pooppy pants liar!”

“Eiko!” Cid exclaimed. “That is no way for a princess to behave!”

“It’s alright.” Ramza said. ‘She is right; I have asked you to trust me, but I have shown you little in kind.’ Everyone who wasn’t already looking at him turned toward him. “I think it’s time I told you the rest. My name is Ramza Beoulve; I am from a land called Ivalice. I’m not surprised if you have never heard of it; it existed around 2000 years ago.”

“What!? Eiko chimed.

“So, you are saying that you are 2000 years old?! But that is not possible!” Freya exclaimed.

“Yes, and no. I am from that time, but I would say that I am a little over thirty years old, give or

take a few years. I'm not sure how to explain it well, but in my time I believe it was these same creatures that attacked. Their force were almost unstoppable. They not only killed thousands, but completely destroyed much of the world. I, and group of people fought against them and I would surely have been slain had it not been for the power of the zodiac stones."

He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "They contain powers far beyond my comprehension. Using them, we were finally able to send the creatures back from where they came. However, it came at a great price. In the battle, all of our friends and allies were slain. We lost anything and everything we held dear. Despite our losses we pressed on, fighting with everything we had left."

He paused again, the memories of their losses still fresh in his mind. "We thought we had won, and I guess that we did, but in sealing away the evil, we were sealed away as well. I had thought we would stay that way, but about a year ago we woke up near Alexandria castle."

"A year ago?" Cid interrupted. "Why did you wait till now to make yourselves known?"

“You must understand; we did not know where we were, let alone who was friend or foe. We did not what was happening until recently, which is why we traveled to the Lifa tree. Even though I was hesitant to use the power of the stone, Rasler thought it would be for the best if we brought Zidane Tribal back to life after he had heard that he was the one who led the group that saved Gaia from this Kuja and his army.”

“Liar! Zidane couldn’t have died! Nothing could hurt him!” Eiko exclaimed.

Freya sighed and then spoke softly. “I did find it unbelievable that he made it back after all this time with hardly a scratch on him... If this stone truly has that kind of power, what price does that power come with?”

“To give life or heal another using the stone, you must give up life or energy of your own, but worse than that, each time you use the stone it will darken the user’s soul.”

“So, the stones are evil?” Freya asked.

“No... at least not entirely, but they seem to have a mind on their own. One may use a stones power

and not even realize he or she has paid any price at all until it is too late.”

“What do you mean? What price did you pay?” Freya pried.

“They sealed the gate... but they needed more energy.. so they took her. They killed my sister. She was all I had left.” He finished, not able to look at them.

“I am sorry, but I must ask. Where are these stones now? And how many of them are there?” Cid asked with interest.

“There are... twelve of them. I don’t know where all of them are, but I do know the location of two of them. He answered cautiously. The others watched in amazement as he then took a small yellow stone from a pouch on his belt and placed it on the table in front of him.” This is Taurus. My friend Rasler has Sagittarius. These are the two stones we were holding when we were trapped in the seal. “He then hurriedly put the stone back in his pouch.

“So if everything you say is true, what do we do now?” Freya asked.

“I do not understand all that is happening.” Ramza started, “but I will go to Alexandria to find

out all that I can and to see if I can find Rasler and the others.”

“If you’re going, I’m going with you. Together, we will surely be able to find them if they are there.” Freya replied.

“Me too! Cause I still don’t trust you, and I want to make sure ur not up to something!” Eiko jumped in. ‘And I won’t take no for an answer!...and you might need a white mage and summoner..’ she added a little more quietly.”

“Well if you are all going to investigate, Why not fly there on one of our airships? Its too dangerous to take you all the way to Alexandria but they will take you as close as possible.” Cid commented.

“Well, I guess that’s settled then.” Ramza laughed. “Let’s go!

..

“Why did you not kill that damned queen as I ordered!?” A cloaked man yelled at Damian as he slammed his fist on the large oak table, his voice booming throughout the grand room.

“It was not my doing! Someone had to have been helping her!” He defended, shaking his head as he

backed away from the table. “She was like clay in my hands! She was practically begging me to kill her!”

“Is that all you have to say for yourself?!” The older man snarled in contempt. “Had you simply killed her instead of toying with her as I instructed, she would be a distant memory!”

“Perhaps the task was far too great for someone as weak as he is.” A second man also dressed in a cloak snickered. “I’ll be more than happy to succeed where he failed.”

Damian gaped at the man disgustedly. “That won’t be necessary! I’m more than capable of her myself! Let me find her, and I will not make the same mistake again.”

The older man stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Hmm.. Yes, I think I will give you another chance. But, if you return without proof of her death, I will make the rest of your existence fitting of your failures. Now be gone from my sight!”

Damian did not argue or make any other comment, instead he turned and rushed out of the room.

“His arrogance will be his undoing, Sire.” The second man commented with a chuckle.

“Your arrogance will do likewise, Terius. I would suggest you guard your tongue more closely.” He remarked uninterestedly as he sat down at the table. He paid no further attention to Tarius for a long while, but the man stood in silence making no effort to attract his attention.

“It matters little whether Damian fails or succeeds, an alternate plan has already been set into motion.”

“I’ve never doubted you Sire. Do you believe damian’s word that she help?”

He growled in annoyance. “Yes. He is a fool, but a poor liar. Some of our scouts have reported a man that matches the description of one of the men that sealed the gateway.”

“But how is that possible?!” Tarius exclaimed.

“He must have been trapped in the seal, though we cannot be certain.”

“Surely one mortal cannot threaten us?”

“No, but it would be foolish to underestimate him, or the others.” He warned. “that being said, you

WILL carry out everything as I have instructed.”

Tarius nodded and left the room, saying nothing more.

The older man turned with a grin at the figure that emerged from shadows of the corner. “Yes.. You will do nicely.” He commented with appreciation, the figure in turn matched its grin with his own. “I’m certain you will not fail me. Set forth to Lindblum. When the blood moon rises in the sky in three days, our armies will march and no force will stand before its might! Three days..”

...

“Shall we not camp for the night?” Steiner asked tiredly. He and Zidane had been traveling well into the night with breaks that were few and far between. They had made quite a bit of progress, but at least a two day journey lay before them. Steiner wiped the sweat from his brow and grudgingly followed the thief, who seemed intent on both continuing and ignoring him.

Another hour passed, and Zidane still showed no sign of slowing. Steiner’s legs and body burned from both the heat of the armor and the exertion of wearing its heavy steel as he traveled the unsteady

trail to Lindblum. He was contemplating taking it off as he bumped into Zidane who had stopped suddenly and was staring at the ground so intently that he didn't even seem to notice being bumped into.

Steiner growled and started to say something to the thief, but stopped upon seeing the pained expression on his face. He debated for a moment on whether to ignore it and enjoy the brief respite, or to ask him what was wrong. He eventually settled on the latter, and asked gruffly. "What is wrong?"

"I just... don't know what to do Steiner." He replied, not looking up. 'I've always had a plan, or been able to come up with something. I've always been able to save her, and be there when she really needed me. I should have protected her, but I didn't!' He yelled, kicking a nearby rock sending it flying across the field. "I couldn't do anything! If I had been in there with her I would have killed the bastard that took her! But no!... Now she's gone and I don't know if I'll ever be able to get her back!.. I've never felt like this before... I... I can't live without her Steiner... Dammit! I was about to propose to her but now I may never even see her again."

Steiner sighed, but didn't know how to respond. At first he had disliked the thief to no end, but he had come to learn that the thief was actually a very trustworthy person and that had truly cared for the queen, and would have done so perhaps even if she had not been queen. He would have told him that she would be alright, and gods knew he wanted her to be, but he also had a sinking feeling that maybe this time things wouldn't be even resemble alright. Listening to Zidane talking about the woman he loved and wanted to be there for, he couldn't help but feel the strings of worry tightening around him for his own love as well. Sure, Beatrix was very strong. She had always been stronger than he, but what if she had been faced be an enemy like the one they had encountered earlier? Or worse? Even if they were somehow alive, would they ever be able to restore Alexandria? His head was beginning to pound with all the questions of doubt.

"We can camp here for the night." Zidane stated, glumly walking to a nearby stump and sitting on it looking up at the night sky.

In an effort that felt like a lie and not wholly himself, Steiner placed his hand on the thief's shoulder and told him they would find a way to fix everything and that they would find her Highness

and Beatrix, he was sure of it. They had come too far to give up and stop trying.

In return Zidane had offered a weak smile and pair began to gather wood for a fire and sat up tents that they had grabbed in Treno. It was more out of old habit than necessity, neither man felt like sleeping. “Get some rest Rusty. I’m gonna go take a walk.” He commented, dusting himself off and turning to leave. Steiner was about to protest, but instead nodded at him with a gruff ‘Be careful.’ And turned his attention back to the fire. Zidane walked down the bank from their camp to a stream that ran nearby. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the stone Rasler had held. Again it glistened, this time reflecting off the water, then went dull. He stared at it intently as if trying to see inside of it for a moment. “I know you probably can’t hear me, but one way or another, I’m coming for you Dagger. I don’t know how these stones work, but I’m gonna find a way to save you, even if it kills me.”

At the end of his words, he would swear that the stone glowed for a moment, but then went dull again. Was it his imagination? He could admit that he was exhausted, but knew sleep would be impossible after all that had happened. Was Dagger sleeping somewhere?

Lost in his thoughts, he walked beside the river for what may have been an hour before he stopped and drank from the water. He splashed some of it against his face; its coolness felt good against his skin. “Zidane? Is that you?” a weak voice called from behind him. He turned sharply toward where the voice had come from, and saw the opening of a cave nearby. The voice had sounded familiar, but his ears had more than likely played a cruel trick on him. He drew his weapon and eyed the cave opening wearily. A small figure limped its way toward him. It appeared to be a woman, although he couldn’t be sure because it was still too far away to tell in the dim of night. As he moved closer to it, and the figure drew nearer, his face changed from one of grim expectancy to one of utter disbelief and he couldn’t help but drop his blade and run to close the distance.

“Dag!” he exclaimed as he grew close to her. She was wearing her usual orange jumpsuit, which was covered in mud and torn in a few places. She looked exhausted and the way she limped, it was obvious she could barely stand. When Zidane grabbed her, this proved to be true, as she collapsed into unconsciousness in his arms. He pulled back and looked at her again. He couldn’t believe she was

alive and ok; she looked like she hadn't slept since the attack and had been crying for a while, but who could blame her? "God's I thought you were gone!" He felt hot tears of relief run down his face. He surveyed her more closely and even though she had a few scrapes and cuts she really was alright. He had been exhausted, but after finding her, he suddenly felt rejuvenated. He lifted her into his arms and after checking to see if Beatrix might also be in the cave, he carried her the distance back to camp.

"Her Highness is alive! Steiner yelled as Zidane walked in view of the firelight. He had been staring at them with concern until he had recognized who he was carrying and had immediately ran to help him set her down by the fire. He then too checked that she was breathing and not severely injured." How is this possible!? You make it out nearly unscathed!"

Zidane couldn't help but let out a relieved laugh that he hadn't somehow imagined the entire thing.

9. Ruins of Alexandria

“The airship began to slow as Freya and the others neared what used to be Alexandria. What had once been luscious green fields and a beautiful waterfall, was now only a barren wasteland of volcanic rock and smoke rising from the barren ground. From the airship, there were no signs of life to be seen, save for a few birds that flew by curiously. The crew had thought they would at least see the base of Alexandria castle still standing, but only a few of the buildings in the city still stood and it was as if the castle had never existed. In its place, the base of a black spire could be seen. They had no way of knowing how tall it was, or if there were any fiends guarding its peak, as all but the base of the spire was veiled in a dark ominous cloud.

“What is that?” Freya asked, not taking her eyes from the black structure.

“It appears to be some sort of tower.” Ramza replied. “I have never seen anything like it before.”

“So, that must be where we’re gonna have to go kick some butt!” Exclaimed Eiko.

“Let’s hope it’s that easy.” Freya replied, grinning at the young girl.

The airship touched down on the barren plains, about a mile from the dark spire and what was left of the abandoned city. “Be careful out there, we have no idea what we might be up against.” Cid warned. “We’ll wait here for you on the airship as long as we can.”

With just a few short farewells, Ramza, Freya and an over-eager Eiko set off toward what used to be Alexandria. They didn’t encounter any monsters on the way to the town, but the town itself was eerily quiet. Not a single person or animal walked the streets, the shops that were still standing were empty but yet were left open. The paved streets were cracked and broken, but there was no blood or any signs that even one person had been killed. It was as if the place had been abandoned for at least a couple of years.

“What happened here?” Freya asked.

“I don’t know.” Ramza replied. “But something feels very wrong here...” he walked over to a nearby flowerpot and noted that the plant was dead, and the soil was barren just as the soil outside the town had

been. “It is as if something is sucking the life out of even the very ground itself.”

“I’m not scared!” Eiko directed at Ramza. “I don’t know about you, but WE fought Kuja and saved the world. With my Eidolons, there’s nothing we can’t handle!”

To her disappointment, Ramza laughed. “You know, there’s nothing wrong with being scared. Your magic may be very strong, but no one is invincible.” She huffed and continued walking. “You can be scared, but I’m not.” He couldn’t help but smile again.

“Did you ever have children?” Freya asked with a smirk.

“What?” he replied stupidly. “No.. I.. uh.. I never really got the chance.”

“What do you mean?”

His face sobered a little as replied. “There was a woman I loved once... In the end, I tried to help her, but my magic wasn’t strong enough... Instead I watched her die in my arms.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. She saved my life that day and countless others... I am thankful she did not die alone.” He responded with a forced smile.

“I see why Cid liked you.” Freya laughed gently. “We better hurry or she’ll leave us behind.” They looked toward Eiko, who bounding off toward the spire.

“Indeed, I believe she would.” But as they arrived at the harbor that had separated the city from the castle, Eiko was standing still and showed no signs of wanting to move forward. What Freya saw made her stomach turn. What had been the clear water was now a black tar-like substance that bubbled, spit and smelled of rot. They could see the spire clearly now; it rose from the base of Alexandria castle, every wall that had stood there, now was only small loose rubble around the edge of it. The surface of the spire was black with a menacing sheen. It had no windows, only a large door forged of iron and giant ancient timbers; a faint red glow could be seen from the cracks at its edges.

“How are we going to get across?” Eiko finally asked.

“We could try to make a raft?” Ramza suggested.

Freya studied the bubbling liquid for a moment before replying. “Ramza, when I met you on the plains, you were using ice spells. Can you freeze this liquid so we can walk across?”

“My magic is not very powerful, but I will try.” He squatted down and touched his hand to the liquid’s surface. “Blizzara!” For a moment, the liquid continued to bubble but gradually it began to crack and harden starting from his hand and moving out slowly.

Eiko then proceeded to walk onto the hardened surface and stomped “It worked! I guess you’re not completely useless after all.”

“Useless?” He quipped.

“What are you, deaf? I said maybe you’re not useless, but I still don’t trust you.” she scowled.

“I guess it’s a start!” he laughed.

The walk across the canal was much faster than riding the boat had ever been, Freya reckoned. It only took a minute, whereas the boat took ten times longer.

“Looking for your friends?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

The three companions looked around, but the voice had come from nowhere. Ramza drew his sword and walked closer to the others. “Who are you?” he asked loudly.

For a moment, there came no reply. However, a few feet in front of them a blue light shimmered and shifted and from it, a seemingly wealthy man stepped forth.

“My name is Damian, though that bit of knowledge will do you little good.”

They eyed him cautiously, worried that he might strike at any moment. They were not foolish enough to believe him to be a normal man. “What did you do to My Zidane?” Eiko asked angrily.

“What, no small talk? What happened to pleasant conversations? Oh well...” he sighed theatrically.

“No one cares!” Eiko yelled. “Tell us where Zidane and Dagger are, or you’ll regret it!”

He smiled a chillingly innocent smile and then pretended to think. “Hmm... Zidane, Zidane... ah, you mean the boy with the tail? Haven’t seen him.” he shrugged. “As for this Dagger, I can only assume you mean the princess? Don’t worry, I didn’t leave a

single scratch on her pretty face; not that she didn't beg me to."

"What!?" Freya exclaimed. "Garnet would never ____"

"Oh but she did. She begged me to end her miserable life. But alas, she was whisked away from me by some magic that I must confess was quite brilliant, meagre, but brilliant nonetheless."

"Do you really expect us to believe that?" Freya asked.

He let out a light chuckle. And ran his hand along the handle of his sword. "No, I suppose not; even if it is all true. However, I believe it is now my turn to ask." He looked at Ramza coldly. "Who might you be? I've seen the others, and know everything about that that I could ever need to know, but I've never seen you before and that troubles me."

"If you drop your weapon, and come toward us I will be glad to tell you." He replied, trying to show no emotion.

"Funny that, do you take me for a fool?"

"What exactly do you take us for?" Freya jumped in.

“I see this conversation is getting nowhere. So, let’s change subject shall we?”

“We didn’t come here to talk to you! We want our friends back!” Eiko yelled.

“I’m hurt. Truly I am... but alas, I merely came here to escort my lovely new companion! I am quite certain she may help you to see the truth, though I confess I have no intention of letting you live long enough to care. Only an absolute fool lets their enemies do as they please unhindered, and I think you’ve gone quite close enough to things you cannot possibly understand. Pitiful humans and rats like you had best stay away.”

He stopped long enough to give a decidedly dashing smile. “I’ve dragged it out long enough, allow me to introduce my faithful companion. Oh Beatrix, My love, I would be so pleased if you would take care of these pests for me. Feel free to tell them why you’ve joined me as you end their meaningless lives. I would help you, but I have other matters to attend.” With a last smile and a bow, he disappeared again into a blue light.

Before they had time to process his words and rapid departure a second light had appeared, and from it came Beatrix, just as he had said.

“Beatrix!” Eiko exclaimed.

“You are alive and well!” Freya commented.

Without notice, Ramza stepped in front of them and pushed them back a step. “I do not believe she is here for a pleasant conversation.”

“I agree.” Beatrix grinned. “At least not with someone evil, such as you. I only came here to kill you, not them.”

Freya glanced at him for a moment, then back at Beatrix. “Ramza is not evil, at least not that I’ve seen. What has happened to you? Surely you’re not working with that man!”

“Nothing happened to me, I gladly joined him. They are the only ones worth bowing to. That man your traveling with is the one that started this, he’s the one that is responsible for destroying Alexandria! Will you not join me Freya? We will kill him together!”

“You can’t be serious!” Ramza exclaimed.

Freya looked at Ramza studying him for a moment then turned back to Beatrix again. “No. I don’t know what’s happened to you, but if you want to kill him, you’ll have to kill us too!”

“So be it!” She scoffed and drew her sword pointedly at Ramza. “I was a fool to ever consider any of your friends. I have seen the truth and if you are with him then you must be dealt with as well.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” Freya replied. “We will always consider you a friend even if we must fight you. Tell me, Is what happened to you the same thing that happened to Garnet? Has she joined that man as well?!”

Beatrix laughed. “No, she was far too weak to see the truth. She was not worth joining our cause! Someone like her is far better off dead!”

Ramza couldn’t help but comment on this in astonishment. “But she was your queen! Could the spell over you truly be so powerful?”

“There is no spell over me.” She spat. “the real Garnet died as a child. That pathetic girl was never fit to be queen. She should have been living on the streets somewhere! Every time it was up to here to make a decision, she turned to others to make it for her. If that alone was not bad enough, she had to go and fall in love with not just another commoner, but a thief! Alexandria would have been better off if it had been ran by imps!”

“You can’t mean that.” Freya said sadly.

“I mean every word. I would rather have died than spent another day protecting someone that barely has a right to live at all!” She readied her sword and stepped toward them. “I have nothing else to say to any of you. Either fight me, or flee for your lives and do not return.”

“I will fight you, Beatrix.” Ramza answered solemnly. “You said that I am the one you are after, so fight me. Someone should never be forced to fight a friend and I do not think your mind is your own.”

“You can’t fight her alone!” Freya objected.

“I am not a knight like you Beatrix, I was never given that honor. In truth, where I am from I am a heretic. But I do not believe our name or title is what makes us who we are. It is our deeds that we do, what we are willing to fight for that matters. Whether you see it or not, you have been blinded by evil. So, I will fight you. To the death if that’s what it takes.”

“If you are so eager to die, then let us see who is stronger.”

“Ramza, you don’t have to fight her alone. We can help you.” Freya grabbed his arm, but he pulled free.

“No, you and Eiko need to go back to the airship so Cid will know what has happened. I will stop her, or at least buy you some time.”

“You think I am going to let them just go where they please?” Beatrix asked humorously.

“You will have no say in the matter!” Ramza replied sharply.

This time Beatrix did not respond, but merely smirked. Quickly she closed the distance between her and Ramza and slashed for a clean beheading slice. Luckily for Ramza, even though he had never considered himself the strongest by any means, he had always been pretty swift. He dodged the slash, feeling the wind from her blade on his chin, and punched her in the stomach with the hilt of his blade. It didn’t quite have the effect he had hoped, as Beatrix had not even seemed to wince and immediately brought her sword down for another strike. He had no choice but to quickly roll away from the attack, though her sword still managed to clip his side enough to draw blood.

He looked toward Freya and Eiko as he regained his footing. “Run!” he yelled, but did not have time to see if they listened or not. He barely managed to get the word from his mouth before steel again slashed toward his face. He brought his own sword to deflect the blow and pushed back as hard as he could, and managed to knock Beatrix back long enough to cast a spell. ‘Thundara!’ The electricity crashed into her, causing her to growl in pain. “Enough of this!” Beatrix yelled. “Climhazzard!” She swung her blade at Ramza and energy shot from her sword toward him. He raised his sword, gritted his teeth and took the blow.

The force of the impact sent him spiraling backwards and broke his sword about a foot from the hilt. As the pain flooded his senses, he felt greatly disoriented and faintly could hear Beatrix laughing victoriously, but he had been in enough battles to know that this was one of the most crucial moments in any struggle. Sure his sword had broken, but it was still usable, and as a whole, he was fine. He stilled his bleary vision and rose to his feet, picking up his broken sword in the process.

“Still have not had enough?” Beatrix asked.

“Your reputation in battle does you no justice.. You are stronger than I, but I will never stop. I will fight you as long as I draw breath!” he charged at her with his sword raised to strike high, but slid at the last moment lowering his blade and slicing into her leg a moment before she was able to block the attack. She grabbed her leg with one hand and swung hard enough to knock Ramza back a few steps as he took the blow. He was thankful he had been able to hold on to his blade, even though he had only just.

He didn't take the time to dwell on it further as he rushed her again, this time she blocked his attack. He knew strength wasn't on his side so he knew he had to keep moving as quickly as he could manage. So, he swung his blade again, and again, and again. Each time she met him move for move but for once he seemed to be gaining a little ground. He kept swinging as sweat dripped from his brow, but as he feared, the advantage did not remain his for long. He was growing tired, but it seemed Beatrix was hardly fazed. He began to worry that he wouldn't even be able to hold her off long enough for them to make it across the canal. His thoughts had drifted for only a moment, but unfortunately it was enough. He saw

her blade coming again, and he knew he wouldn't be able to block it in time.

Suddenly, there was a crack almost like thunder and Beatrix howled in pain and turned around instead of finishing her attack. Behind her, he could see Freya re-steadying herself from what he guessed was a powerful attack. That was twice she had saved his life..

“Damn you!” she yelled, backing away as Eiko came running as well. “I’ve had more than enough of all of you! It is time you saw the true power that my new liege has given me!”

Ramza backed up further, panting. “What power?”

Beatrix reached into her vest and pulled out a purple stone.

“I don’t know what power they have told you about, but you do not want to use that!” Ramza yelled.

“I know very well what power it possesses.” Beatrix replied smugly. “But I don’t blame you; you have every right to be afraid.”

“Listen, if you use that stone, what is left of you will be gone forever!” He pleaded. “Please listen to reason! You’ll only be hurting yourself! There are people that care about you!”

“Pathetic.” She replied. ‘If you wanted to beg for your life, you could at least be honest about it. As for the “People’ that care about me, I feel nothing for them. I’m sorry, but I did not come here to show you mercy!” She peered deeply into the stone and spoke again, this time speaking to the stone itself. “Hear my pleas, give me the power to lay waste to my enemies.” After only a few seconds a beam of light shot from the stone into the sky, expanding and blanketing the entire area where Beatrix had stood. As the light grew, he could hear her laughter grow with it. But, her laughter did not last. The white radiating light that engulfed her turned black. Her laughter twisted and distorted and faintly through the roar of power that followed, he believed he could hear her screaming in pain.

“I’m sorry Beatrix. I tried to help you, but you were too far gone.” He said quietly, as he braced himself for what was to come. The dark light crackled and finally settled. In its place stood a creature he could only describe as a demon. It had four twisted horns atop its head. Its face was slim,

with three slotted eyes. The demon's body was also slim, more so than Beatrix's had been. Its three clawed feet looked to be very nimble and yet full of power, just as its armored arms seemed to be. Of all the fiends he had seen, this one had hands that were closer to human than any of the others even though they were black and reptile-like. On this particular fiend, the part that unsettled him the most was its sickening grin filled with black teeth.

"What power!" It yelled. "More strength than I have ever felt! And Knowledge! Ages of history and understanding! I've never felt like this before! So, this is what it is to be a God!"

"I pity you for what you've become." Ramza said regretfully. "You are no god; you are far less than you were."

The creature did not bother holding back a laugh. "You fool! If you could feel the power that I feel you would be on your knees begging for mercy!"

"I would never beg for anything from a creature such as you. I've dealt with your kind before and you do not scare me!"

The creature's grin fell, but was replaced with a sneer. "Do you truly believe you have a chance to

beat me with naught but a broken sword!?”

“No, But he can with our help!” Freya yelled.

“We decided we couldn’t leave you behind.” Eiko replied. “And besides, we wanted to make this thing pay for what it did to Beatrix!”

“I certainly won’t turn down the help!” he laughed.

The creature growled. “It does not matter how much help you get! You pathetic humans are like roaches beneath my feet!”

The battle began again. At first they thought maybe the fiend didn’t have time to attack, but now it seemed as though it was toying with them. Each time they attacked, it simply and nimbly avoided them, but it did not return their attacks. They were already tiring, and they had yet to even land a blow. Eiko tried to summon but it just wouldn’t stay in one place long enough, so she was afraid the eidolons would hurt her companions as well. They were trying to come up with a strategy that could help them defeat it, however, they did not have to as the fiend backed away from them and began to glow. After a moment, the light faded and Beatrix stood before them again just as she had before

transforming. That is except for her eyes. Her eyes were cold and no trace of humanity remained.

“You fools are even more pathetic than I had first thought. You’re not worth my time. If you somehow make it to the underworld alive, I’ll be waiting.” She turned to leave. Freya yelled at her to stop, but it was no use. After only a few steps she disappeared into a blue light and was gone.

“What WAS that? Eiko asked breathlessly.” That definitely wasn’t Beatrix.”

“No.” Ramza replied, falling to his knees in exhaustion. “I’m sorry to say that it was Beatrix, or at least what was left of her. I do not know what happened to her. We can only hope the same fate hasn’t befallen the others.”

10. Return to Lindblum

“Dagger.. you’re awake.” Zidane commented in relief as her eyes began to open.

It was now morning in their small camp. Steiner had been overwhelmed with relief that she was alive and had eagerly asked Zidane how he had found her. His eagerness had dissipated, however, upon learning that there had been no trace of Beatrix.

Zidane had watched with sadness as the broken man took to her as he had in their fight with Kuja. Back then he had thought it was annoying and honestly kind of creepy. But after getting to know him better, he realized hit Steiner’s way of dealing with stress and maybe have things be just a little bit more back to normal. Even now he was now trying to boil some water to make a light stew from a mu he had killed and a few local herbs that Zidane had grabbed as an afterthought.

“Zidane?” She asked dreamily.

“Yea, its me.” He smiled.

She smiled in return and sat up, more easily than Zidane had expected. She looked around their small

camp and then back to him. “Where are we?”

Zidane chuckled lightly. Out of all the things that had happened and everything that was still going on, she wanted to know where they were. She had to still be out of it. “We’re about two days from Lindblum.”

“Oh.” She replied dazedly. “Did we come all this way by ourselves?”

If she’s this out of it, it must have really hit her hard. Damn. “Uh.. No, Rusty should be back in a min; he went to get more wood for the fire.” He couldn’t shake the feeling of worrying about her. Did she even know about Alexandria? If she did know about it the pain would no doubt hit her soon, and hard.

“Is something wrong?” She asked softly. Her voice snapped him out of his daze. “No.. I mean yea, are you ok?”

She looked down at her hands for a moment as if unsure. “I think so, I’m not hurting anywhere.”

Zidane sighed and ran his hand through his golden blond hair. “Shit..” he knew he was gonna regret this. “That’s not what I meant... I mean are you ok? Do you even know about Alexandria?”

“What about it?” She jerked up suddenly.

“Dammit.. I’m an ass.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no easy way to say it, Dag. The whole castle is gone and everyone in it; we barely made it out alive.” He replied solemnly.

“But I... That’s not true!” She exclaimed, shaking her head. “I was just there, I just..”

“I’m afraid its true, your highness..” Steiner said sadly from behind her. He walked over and dropped a small pile of wood next to the fire. “Do you remember anything that happened?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Zidane jumped in.

“I... I was to have a meeting with a man named Damian.. I went to the meeting and waited for him to arrive and then.. I woke up in the field not far from here. I thought maybe I had dreamed all of it and sleep walked somehow..”

“Do you remember what happened to Lady Beatrix?” Steiner asked pleadingly.

“I.. she was standing beside me when he...” Her face grew pale. “He... attacked us. Beatrix tried to fight him off, but he was too strong.. he said he had two others helping him.”

“Two others?” Steiner asked.

“Yes, I remember now! He said they were like him and that they were not from here. He said that you had met one of them!”

Zidane felt a horrible realization dawn on him. “Dammit! He must have been talking about Rasler, and the other guy..” he commented disgustedly.

“I told you we should not have trusted that lunatic! He was behind this all along! How else would he have known what was going on unless he caused it!” Steiner roared furiously.

“You followed them!?! Where are they now?” Garnet asked, her voice a mixture of fear and surprise.

“Yea..” Zidane started regrettably. “One of them led us out of the castle and helped us fight this fiend in Treno... At least I thought he did at the time, but now that I think about it, he didn’t really do much. Something was seriously going on with him. We’re headed to Lindblum now to try to find the other guy

and get some answers. But anyway, we'll deal with that when we get there, how did you make it out of there Dag?"

"I'm sorry.. I can't remember." She replied apologetically. Maybe the necklace had worked? He thought. "What are we going to do? Zidane, there has to be something we can do stop them and fix this! You always think of something."

He wanted to tell her that he didn't know, that he felt powerless to do anything, but in the end he simply smiled and told her everything would be ok, of course he had a plan. Truth be told he didn't know if going to Lindblum was going to solve anything, but she could hope couldn't she? He never liked lying to her, but this time he just couldn't help it.

The three of them ate the meager stew, then headed on toward Lindblum. He still couldn't believe that she was holding herself together as well as she was, he had always known dagger was one of the strongest women he knew, but she never ceased to amaze him. A part of him still worried that she was going to end up having a breakdown, but at least he'd be there for her, he reckoned. He wasn't the only one that was relieved to have her back

though, he noticed Steiner also didn't seem as down as he had before. Hell, maybe they could do this, even get Beatrix back too. It was during these thoughts that the ground began to shake.

"What is this?" Steiner asked.

"Shit, what now!?" Zidane exclaimed. Garnet grabbed onto his arm and watched as the ground cracked and split a stone's throw ahead of them. With a breaking roar, rubble and stones shot from the ground in a powerful geyser, and from it, a huge black dragon screeched into the sky.

"Hole shit!" He yelled. "What kind of fuckin dragon is that!?"

"Um... I hope we don't have to fight that thing." A wide eyed Garnet commented.

The dragon whirled in the air, then spread its massive wings and flapped easily in the air facing them.

"Looks like it's not gonna be our lucky day." Zidane stated dryly.

It let out another loud screech as if in pain and dove toward them. "Here it comes!" Steiner yelled, sword ready as always. Zidane barely had time to

dive both himself and Dagger out of the way before its sharp wings sliced through the air where they had stood. Steiner had swung his blade at the dragon, but its speed and force was too much, his sword cut a notch into the top of its wing but he was knocked backward and winded in the process.

“Dammit Rusty, you can’t fight that thing head on! We’ll have to think of something else!” The dragon turned around in the air and came back for them again. This time however, the Dragon landed before them and opened its mouth. Fire danced between its sharp teeth and spilled out onto the ground below. ‘This doesn’t look good; Dag, can you summon Bahamut?’ he asked, not taking his eyes from the dragon. “Alright.. Ill try.” she responded. Zidane watched as she called upon the eidolon. He couldn’t help but grin thinking of how powerful the dragon king was. But it did not come. The dragon unleashed a torrent of fire toward them, ignoring the fallen knight. He grabbed her arm and yanked he roughly behind a nearby rock. “What happened Dag?” he asked hurriedly. “I.. I don’t know.. I’m sorry Zidane.”

“S’ok, I just gotta think of something quick. Stay here.” He pulled his dagger from his belt and ran toward the dragon, dodging its spurts of fire as he

went. He was tired from the heat of the flames, but he ran and slid under the dragon's head, nearly scorching his tail in the process but also managing a shallow cut on the dragon's underside. He rolled to avoid its claws as it angrily brought them down to crush his head. He had barely recovered from rolling when its tail whipped toward him. He swung his dagger toward the large tail as it impacted. He managed to slice off the end of it, despite it being covered in scales. Unfortunately, a spike from the tail still managed to impale into his upper arm, nearly knocking the blade from him.

He wasted no time laying around in pain. He grabbed the tail with his good arm and yanked himself atop its back. The dragon screeched in protest and took off into the air, trying to dislodge its unwanted passenger. Despite having to concentrate on holding on, which he did impressively, he managed to find a small gap between its scales and stabbed into it over and over again. It flailed around in agony, and after what seemed like decades, crashed into the ground in defeat. Sending Zidane rolling across the ground.

Steiner wasted no time in rushing over and delivering the final blow. He looked toward Zidane with only a slight hint of amazement. "And you tell

me not to attack it head on! Are you trying to get yourself killed!?”

Zidane dusted himself off, and inspected his wounded arm, which throbbed furiously. “Hey, it worked didn’t it?”

Garnet walked hurried from behind the rock, and seeing that the dragon was dead, rushed over to his side. He looked at her, a worried expression on his face. “Are you alright, Dag?”

“What do you mean? You’re the one that needs healing.” she scolded. “What were you thinking!?”

Maybe he was over-thinking things, she seemed to be fine now. Either way, sure they had lost Alexandria, but they could rebuild a new one; at least they were still together. So he just flashed his usual trademark grin, and let her use her white magic to heal his wounds.

The rest of the journey to Lindblum was mostly uneventful. Steiner and Garnet talked about things that had happened and he told her more details about Rasler and the Fiends they had fought. Surprisingly, it was Zidane that was uncharacteristically quiet, though they did not seem to notice. When they arrived, they were a little surprised to see Lindblum

on lockdown, but thought that was probably a good idea after what happened to Alexandria.

They were greeted upon their arrival by Minister Artania, who was very happy to see them again. “Greetings your Highness! It is so good to see you!” He exclaimed happily.

“It’s good to see you too, uncle Artania!” Garnet replied, hugging him. He broke from the hug and looked at her apologetically. “I’m terribly sorry to have to do this, but I was told to verify that all our visitors are who they say they are. Even though I know it is you, may I please see your royal pendant?”

“Um.. Sure.” Garnet replied, and tugged the pendant delicately from her blouse. It glistened in the light of the room. ‘That is indeed the Falcon Claw. Again I apologize for asking.’ He bowed and motioned toward the elevator. “I believe the Regent will be returning soon, perhaps in the meantime you would like to rest in our guest rooms?”

“What the hell’s goin on?” Zidane asked with concern.

“Along with the news of what befell Alexandria, The regent received word that a great danger was

coming and that everyone might not be whom they claim to be. So, he decided to ere on the side of caution so that another catastrophe might be prevented. We had feared that you and Her Majesty might have fallen as well, but I'm sure the Regent will be overjoyed as well to see that you are all well."

"You said that Uncle Cid had left, did he say where he was going?"

"Ah yes, he and the others left to investigate Alexandria to see if there were any survivors, including yourselves." He replied thoughtfully.

"Others?" Steiner asked.

"I believe it was Lady Freya, Lady Eiko, and a Sir Ramza."

"Ramza?" Zidane started. "He's the guy we're looking for!"

"The regent may be in danger!" Steiner jumped in.

...

"Why won't this stupid thing open?!" Eiko yelled, beating against the large door of the black structure.

“Did you truly think it would be that easy?” Ramza replied.

“Well she said she was gonna be waiting for us! The least they could have done is left the stupid door open!”

“There has to be another way, Eiko” Freya reassured.

The three had been trying for the past few hours, without success, to get to the underworld where Beatrix had said she would be waiting for them. Ramza was frustrated at not being able to open the door to the spire, but was mostly able to keep it in check. That is until Eiko also became impatient and began complaining every few minutes.

“Why do we gotta go to the stupid underworld anyway? If she wants to fight why can’t she just come to us? And aren’t you supposed to be an expert on how to get there?”

“I’ve told you three times already, in my time there was no door blocking the way! Nor a tower for that matter!” Ramza countered.

“You poopie head!,” She replied, sticking out her tongue. “You probably just don’t want us to get there.”

He looked at Freya in desperation. She chuckled. “Be nice, Eiko. What do you say we head back to Lindblum? Maybe we can come up with something there? We’re obviously not doing much good here.”

Ramza sighed in defeat and agreed.

When they arrived at the airship they were greeted by Cid, who was eager to hear news of what had happened. After he commanded the airship to depart, they told him of Alexandria’s condition and what had happened of Beatrix. “Is there a chance that the real Beatrix could still be out there?” He asked.

“I’m sorry to say that I do not believe so, from what I’ve seen these creatures possess the person and kill them as they take over. I have yet to hear of someone being replaced instead of being possessed.”

“That is grave news indeed. How are we to know who is possessed and who is not?”

“My companion and I possess bracelets that help you to see when these fiends are present and slightly enhance your other senses. I do not know where these bracelets came from, or what their original purpose was. I only know that they have saved our lives on many occasions.”

“How far away do they work?” Cid asked. “May I see it?”

“Of course.” Ramza replied, taking it off and handing it to him. “Unfortunately only a few paces away, and they only help you to see the fiend for but a moment and it seems to not be as effective if there are more than one.”

“Hmm I’ve never seen anything like it..” he pondered. “but with enough time we might possibly be able to create more of them. The only problem will be figuring out what spells it is enchanted with, I cannot read these engravings.”

“Neither can I, but you may study it for as long as you need to, if you think it might help to stop these fiends.”

...

“Have you seen Zidane?” Garnet asked Steiner who had insisted on standing guard in the guest room she was staying. “No, I have not seen him in a while. But I would not worry, I am sure he went to check on the other thieves.” Now that he thought about it, it was odd that he hadn’t tried to have alone time with the que— Garnet.

“You know, you don’t have to call them thieves.”

“I know they have proven themselves to be decent people, but the fact is they are still thieves.” It wasn’t that he hated them, in fact he had grown to like Tantalus, probably more than he should have. It was simply that they were just so different than how he had been raised. The things he would never even consider doing they often did just for laughs such as running through the castle, paying no heed to rules or order. Hell, half the time they acted like misbehaving children.

“Alright.” She replied softly.

He had expected her to argue with him, as she always did, but she did not. She had been acting a little strange lately. He couldn’t quite place his finger on it, but who was he to judge her? She had been through more hard times in her life than anyone that had ever lived before her. He reckoned.

“Shall I go look for him?” He asked, knowing that she would more than likely want him to.

“No... It will be alright. I’m sure he will come back soon.” She responded.

He only gave it a moment’s thought before returning his attention back to the duty at hand. When had his mind started to wander so? It used to

be so easy to concentrate on his duties, but now he was always thinking of other things. Was Beatrix still alive somewhere? He didn't want to openly admit it, but he missed her terribly. Had the thief really gone to find his friends? He had grown to become fond of the thief. He would admit that Zidane, to his knowledge, hadn't stolen anything in a very long time, but he had always been taught once a thief, always a thief. It wasn't like the boy to be so distant, especially around her majesty. Perhaps he was more troubled by things than he let on?

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"God! I'm so glad we're off that airship!" Eiko exclaimed, bouncing down the airship dock.

"I do apologize, it seems there are a few kinks I need to work out in the new model." Cid commented.

"We made it back in one piece, that's what matters." Ramza replied, looking more than a little pale as he stepped out of the airship.

"Are you alright?" Laughed Freya.

Ramza grabbed the rail of the dock and held onto it tightly for a moment, closing his eyes and taking slow and concentrated breaths. "I... We didn't have

airships where I came from.. I definitely prefer having my feet on the ground.”

Cid and Freya both could not contain a laugh at this, and continued to chuckle about it as the group made their way down the red carpet of the indoor airship dock. They were greeted by a guard who was eager to share the news that the queen of Alexandria had arrived and was staying in the guest room with her friends.

“That is wonderful news!” Cid exclaimed. ‘Please tell them to come to the conference room in an hour, so that I can see them and we can all be caught up in everything that has happened thus far.’ With that, he politely excused himself and headed toward the elevator and his chamber. Freya began to walk toward the guest rooms, but noticed that Ramza wasn’t following. Instead, he was marveling at the large area. “I just cannot get used to how massive and detailed this castle is; in my time, castles were not even close to the size. They were built for war and always seemed foreboding, but this castle feels more like a city!”

Freya smiled knowingly, remembering the first time she had set foot in Lindblum. She too had been amazed at how much different Lindblum had been

than Burmecia. “You can stay here, I’m just going to check on the others.” When she arrived at the guest chamber, she found Steiner asleep in a chair next to the door but no sign of Zidane or Garnet. They must have wanted some alone time she reasoned. With a chuckle she gently shook Steiner awake, who immediately tried to defend his sleeping on the job but was relieved that it was Freya instead of the thief. The mockery he would have gotten would have been infuriating. “Have you seen Garnet or Zidane?” She asked, trying to hold back laughter.

“i.. She..” he stammered around uselessly for a few moments. “She must have went looking for him!” he finally exclaimed, clanging out of the room toward the main hall. As he approached the fountain, a man stood dressed not too differently from how Rasler had been. He was carrying a thin sword that was decidedly not Lindblum issue.

He was one of them! He was sure of it! Her majesty had said that she thought they were all the cause of it, and it made sense; none of this had started until they had showed up and Steiner had learned the hard way not to believe in coincidences. But perhaps it would be better to just keep an eye on him and wait for the opportunity to strike instead of attacking him head on.

“You must be Captain Steiner; my name is Ramza.” he greeted pleasantly.

What kind of game is this? Why would he offer me greetings? Treachery! I don’t buy it, not for a second. He though

“A pleasure to meet you, Ramza, I have heard about you.”

“It will be an honor to fight alongside you against these fiends.” He replied, extending his hand. Steiner merely looked at him and offered the most sincere smile he could muster (Truthfully, it would have been hard to tell it from a look of scorn) and nodded his head. Ramza withdrew his hand. “I suppose that is not your custom? Forgive me.”

The awkwardness of the situation was broken by the squad of guards coming toward them. The guards encircled them and a confused Freya who had been listening to the exchange.

“HALT! Stay where you are! Relinquish your weapons!”

Ramza and the others slowly drew their weapons and laid them on the ground.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding...” He commented

The guards grew closer, and whisked away their weapons and returned to pointing their spears at them.

“I demand to know the meaning of this! I am no criminal!” Steiner yelled.

“The Regent has been assassinated, and you are the ones that last made contact with him!”

“What!?” The exclaimed in unison.

“Don’t play the fool! Throw them all in the dungeon!”

“I don’t suppose running would be an option?..” Ramza groaned, as more guards surrounded them.

11. Departure

“Yo, Zidane!” Marcus greeted, as his blond haired friend walked through the door of their newly repaired hideout, if you could call it that considering it was in the middle of Lindblum.

“Holy hell, am I glad to see you bro!” Blank jumped in, giving him a high five

“Where the hell have you been asshole?” Marcus commented.

“Yea.” blank started. “That was some crazy shit that happened in Alexandria, luckily we managed to get some of the people out safely.”

“Wait, you did? How in the hell did you manage that?” Zidane replied, looking at him with surprise.

“Gwahaha, we were just droppin’ by to see ya.” Baku laughed, stumbling into the room. Zidane couldn’t help be smile at seeing the boss, whom he had always looked up to as a father figure. “We parked the ship, and I’ll be damned if I didn’t see the castle crumble to the ground.”

“Yea, it was crazy.” Cinna jumped in waving his favorite hammer. “Nobody knew what the hell was going on. We all thought you and everyone else in the castle was dead. A lot of people just dropped their stuff and ran, we put everyone we could fit on the ship and dropped them off at Dali.”

“Hell speak for yourself, I knew he’d make it outta there.” Blank defended.

“Damn, I don’t know what I’d do without you guys.” Zidane grinned.

“So what brings you here?” Baku asked.

“Can’t I just stop by and say hello?”

“You never just stop by, did you and yer chick get into it again?” He laughed.

“You might as well spill it.” Blank added.

“Hell, I don’t know.” He exhaled and sat down in a nearby chair. “Dag... she just seems different somehow.”

“She just lost her whole damn kingdom again and most of the people in it, of course she’s gonna be a little off for a while.” Blank reasoned.

“I know that; I just.. Dammit, it’s more than that. The Dagger I know would have been devastated, but instead she seems like it barely even bothers her.”

“Shit, we both know she’s gotten a lot stronger.”

“Hell, I guess.” Zidane relented. “This whole damn thing just happened so suddenly I guess it has me shook up. Maybe I just need a drink.”

“Yea, bro. We’ll sure as hell fix you up!” Together they walked toward the makeshift bar Cinna had constructed near the corner of the room, and blank poured his tailed brother more than a shot whiskey.

After the rest of the gang had seated on their stools, he told them about Rasler, the asshole that had been having a meeting with Garnet, the old man in the alley, and the other strange monsters and events that had happened. They listened to him quietly as he told his story, but didn’t seem too surprised about the rich guy or Rasler.

“Yea.” Baku started. “I’m pretty sure we saw that Rasler guy four or five months back in Treno.”

“He probably wouldn’t have even caught our attention.” Blank jumped in. “but we thought maybe he was some new mercenary or something and he

caught our interest. He never stayed in one place for long, but we watched him walking around through the back alleys. He never walked on the main roads unless that was the only way. I guess the main thing that got us was that we heard him talking to some blond haired guy outside the auction house about you.”

“What about me?” Zidane asked.

“He was saying that he thought the tailed boy was the one they were looking for.” Marcus answered.

“Yea, the other guy said they needed to pay Garnet a visit because it might be important while they still had enough time.” Cinna added.

“Time before what?”

“We didn’t hear the whole conversation.” Blank continued. “But something was definitely up, cus after they finished talking, they both hurried and left. We were gonna mention the guy to Garnet, but we got busy pullin the job we were on and forgot about it.”

“Damn.” Zidane dragged, downing his second glass in as many minutes. “So if that was when he was looking for me to bring me back to life, if that’s

even the truth, then what the hell was the other guy doing in all that time? And what in the hell did they want with Dagger?”

“Your guess is as good as ours, but it has to have something with all the crazy shit that’s been going on.”

“Besides what happened to Alexandria, and Treno being empty?”

“Yea, there’s been some pretty messed up monsters out lately. They’re a hell of a lot stronger than anything we’ve seen around here before. It ain’t just the monsters though, the weather has lost its damn mind, and I heard there’s some kind of crazy storm near Esto Gaza.” Blank finished.

At the mention of this a memory struck him. *“Another thing you need to be weary of is that a storm is coming... Unlike anything this generation has ever seen.”* Rasler had said, but had he meant an actual storm? Maybe it had all been a deception in one way or the other to distract him?

“Zidane?” Garnet called from the doorway. Her voice snapped him out of his near dazed (and slightly buzzed) state. He turned to look at her, and

damned if she wasn't as beautiful as ever, her hair glistening in the rays of the setting sun.

"Yo Dag, what's up?" Blank greeted.

"Uncle Cid said that he wanted us to meet in the conference room, and I wanted Zidane to be there with me. I'm sure all of you are welcome too."

"Aww." Zidane slurred, trying to return to his usual cheerfulness. "Miss me that bad?" He tried to ignore Blank coughing mockingly in the background.

"Maybe." She smiled. "Am I not allowed to want your company?"

"Of course you are." He smirked and wrapped his arm around her waist with a theatrical flourish.

"C'mon guys, I'm sure you'll be able to help with whatever is goin on. Let's not keep Cid waiting."

Baku and Cinna elected to stay behind and tend to matters of their own, but Marcus and Blank were eager to join them. As the group made their way down the streets of Lindblum, they noticed that the usual bustle of people going about their daily tasks was absent. That same feeling of dread that was becoming all too familiar began to fill the air.

“What the hell is going on?” Blank asked aloud, to no one in particular. The daylight quickly faded away, seemingly faster with each step they took, but they all felt fortunate that the air cab was just up ahead.

“Going somewhere?” A familiar voice called from behind them. Zidane was the first to turn, snapping his view to his right. From out of the building nearby, the man he had come to know as Rasler stepped from the shadows.

“Rasler! You are alive.. What are you doing here!?” Zidane exclaimed accusingly, and drew his dagger. The others following his lead.

“Calm yourself Tribal.” He replied, his face betraying slight confusion. “There’s no need to draw your weapon. We are allies, are we not?”

“Allies!?” Garnet jumped in angrily, stepping out from behind the others. “You are the one responsible for this!”

His eyes showed surprise and perhaps even alarm at seeing her there, but he made no comment of it at first. He did, however, look behind himself for a few moments into the darkness of the doorway before replying to her outburst.

“Well... this is certainly a surprise.” He commented, eyeing her carefully.

“Why did you do this, you scumbag!?” Zidane growled. “I know you’re working with Damian, So why in the hell did u bother helping out of the castle; what are you playing at!?”

“He wanted you to trust him so that they could use you like he tried to use me!” Garnet answered.

“I don’t recall asking your opinion on the matter, Your Highness.” Rasler responded dryly. “Shall I bow in respect, or kneel in servitude at your presence?”

“How dare you! You—” She started again, but was interrupted by Zidane. “What are you doing here Rasler!? We won’t let you do anything to Lindblum!”

“I don’t believe I have done anything against you Tribal, but then I’ve always been a bit slow on things like that.” Rasler started, not taking his eyes from Garnet. “My father was the first to point it out. There was something very important I needed to show you, but things have obviously changed. So, I suppose you all want to fight me now? Well, if it’s a fight you’re after, come to Esto Gaza, to the eye of

the storm. I'll be waiting for you. There, you will get your answers!"

"Why don't you tell us now?!" Zidane countered. Rasler was momentarily distracted by something in the shadows behind him, and turned from them again talking to something or someone they couldn't see. They couldn't make out what he said, but after a few words he turned toward them again clearly more agitated.

"If I said that I have done nothing but try to help you, would u believe my words?" He asked. "I doubt it. But, as I've said things have gotten more complicated than you know. I'll see you in Esto Gaza, Tribal. Don't keep me waiting."

They would have questioned this, but in a blink of an eye, Rasler, or what had at least seemed to be him, was gone.

Zidane cursed under his breath, and turned to his Tantalus brothers after Rasler disappeared. "I think we should go get the others, I have a bad feeling about this."

Garnet looked as though she might disagree, but instead nodded in agreement. "We'll need to hurry before they do something else!"

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“This is ridiculous!” Freya exclaimed to the guard, through the iron bars of the dungeon cells. “We were friends of the regent!” The guard made no move to reply.

“If we had planned on killing him, don’t you think we would have killed him before we returned to the castle?” Ramza asked.

“Shut Up!” Steiner yelled. “If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t be in this situation!”

“Me?” he replied flabbergast. “Do you truly believe I killed the Regent?!”

“Yes!” The Princess said you were working with that-that fiend! “He yelled.

“That’s a lie!” He defended.

“We need to calm down, Im sure this is just a misunderstanding.” Freya tried to calm them. She guessed it worked, as sat against the brick wall and said nothing further. After around an hour, the door to the Dungeon opened, and in walked... Eiko?

Freya stood from where she had been sitting on the dirty concrete floor, and began to try to talk to

her, but it was Eiko who spoke first. “That’s them. Let them go this instant!”

The guard swallowed hesitantly as he eyed the young girl. “All of them?” He asked. “No, just the ones outside the cell. Yes all of them stupid head!”

Freya thought she looked as though she had been crying, but commended the girl for how well she hid it.

“Might I inquire as to why, My lady?” He asked, already retrieving the key. “They were with me! And they couldn’t have killed father, cus father isn’t dead!”

“Cid is alive!? They exclaimed in unison. She concluded that yes, he was still alive but that he was in critical condition and had yet to awaken. At her request the guard opened the cell and the group led by Eiko left the dungeon and headed to the conference where she told them that mother would be waiting for them.

When they arrived, Eiko told them that she was going back to check on Cid and gave them little time to respond as she bounded on her way.

Inside the conference room, they found Hilda seated at the throne surrounded by no less than six

guards. Freya smiled as she saw her. "I am glad to see you are well. How is Cid?"

Hilda shook her head sadly. "I believe he may recover, but he has a long way to go before we can be sure."

"What happened to him?" Steiner asked, moving his hands in concern.

"We think someone was waiting for him in his chamber, though we don't know how they were able to sneak past the guards. They stabbed him multiple times with a small dagger, but by some miracle they managed to miss his heart." She answered with both sadness and relief. "I apologize that you all were put in the Dungeon, I do not believe you were the ones that tried to kill my husband."

"It's no problem." Freya comforted. "I can't imagine what you must be going through. Is there anything at all we can do to help?"

Again she shook her head. "I'm afraid there's little you can do here. Did Cid tell you what he wanted to meet about? We did not get the chance to talk."

"What do u mean we can't go in!? We were told to come here!" A voice yelled from the other side of

the large doors. “Somebody better tell me what in the HELL is going on!”

“Open the doors!” Hilda Commanded softly. The guards obeyed, and the doors swung open revealing a more than slightly pissed off Zidane, Garnet and the others.

“Garnet!” Freya beamed. “I’m glad to see you and monkey-boy are alive and well!”

They both smiled as they walked closer. “Glad to see you’re okay too Rat-face.” He commented as he hugged her. “What did we miss?”

He looked past her and eyed Ramza curiously and also noticed that Cid wasn’t around and that Hilda was sitting where he normally did. So, he asked where he was. She told him about what had happened and that he had barely managed to survive.

“My Uncle is still alive? Thank the gods! Where is he now?” Garnet exclaimed.

“He is still recovering, Eiko is already in there, and I think its best if he doesn’t have any more visitors. I’m sorry, you can see him again when he wakes.”

“Who are you?” Zidane asked Ramza, his voice edged with anger. Ramza extended his hand as he had with Steiner. ‘My name is Ramza, you must be Zidane. I’m glad that I’m finally able to meet you.’ He took his hand, but did not return his smile. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“He’s being trying to help us.” Freya answered for him.

He released Ramza’s hand and turned to Freya. “Are you sure we can trust him?”

“Says the thief.” Freya laughed. “As sure as I can be. Are you alright Zidane?” She eyed him skeptically.

“I think I just need some sleep, but I can do that on the airship. Rasler wants us to come to Esto Gaza. He said we’d find answers there.”

“So, Rasler is alive! That’s good news indeed.” Ramza laughed.

Zidane scowled at him. “I’m not so sure about that. You may be on our side, but I don’t think he is anymore. Esto Gaza may even be a trap, but there’s only one way to find out.

“No, He would willingly turn on us.” He disagreed but was sadly continued. “If he is truly fighting against us now, then we can only assume that he has fallen to them and his mind is no longer his own.”

“He is your friend.” Freya commented. “You would fight against him.”

“Yes.” Ramza answered. “If he has joined fiends that control the underworld, then the friend I knew is already dead. We knew even before we journeyed together the first time that the odds of us surviving were very slim. It won’t be easy but I will do what I have to for all the people that still live.”

He then looked at Zidane. “I know you don’t trust me Zidane, but if I do anything against you or that betrays what we are fighting for. I hope you will do what it takes to kill me as well. Shall we go to Esto Gaza?”

“You can take the Hilda Garde III to there.” Hilda offered “I know my husband would insist on it.”

“Ok.” Zidane replied. “Let’s go! Who’s going with us?”

“I believe I will stay behind to make sure no one tries to attack the Regent again or the king of

Burmecia.” Freya spoke up.

“I will stay behind as well.” Steiner added.

“Really?” Zidane asked Steiner in disbelief.

“Yes, I do not believe you will let anything happen to the prin— her highness. I think it will be more beneficial for me to assist Lady Freya.” She smiled at him warmly.

“Alright, you guys be careful. Who know what in the hell is gonna happen next. We’ll be back as soon as we can.” With that, Zidane, Garnet, Ramza, Blank and Marcus headed toward Esto Gaza and the storm that awaited them.

12. The Underworld

A/n: I just wanted to say thank you to those that have left reviews for this story. To say I appreciate it would be an understatement. You guys give me the motivation to keep writing and help me to stay on track. I feel i need to give a shout out to Jota Te in particular, Jota Te is writing a beautiful fic mostly centered around Freya Crescent called The Last Cherry Blossom that i recommend reading. Again, thanks to everyone who has taken the time to leave a review. I hope you all enjoy reading this chapter as much as i enjoyed writing it.

...

“Rasler...”

“Rasler... come back home to me...”

“What are you saying?” Rasler asked distantly. “I am home. We can live together again.”

“Stay here with me Rasler...”

“I told you that I would. No more fighting pointless battles. We can finally live our lives here together however we want.”

She turned and began to walk away. “But you can’t... can you?” she called softly over her shoulder. “Do you really think you can stay after all that has happened?”

What had happened? He asked himself as he looked down at his hands, only to realize they were covered in blood. He gasp in disgust at the sight of them and tried desperately to wipe them off. “No! It was not my fault! I tried to save her!” He looked up and realized the woman was running away from him.

He felt an overwhelming sense of desperation as he began to chase after her, even though she was wearing a long white dress she seemed to be moving faster than he ever could. “Come back! Please do not run from me! I would not lie to you!” He chased her down the marble corridor as fast as he could run, but as soon as he thought he could almost touch her, she would effortlessly turn down another corridor without missing a beat. Despite his best efforts, he could not turn on the marble floor as easily and would either crash into the corresponding wall, or miss the corridor entirely and have to go back.

“What do you mean I can’t stay!?” he huffed tiredly. He began to notice that the air was becoming

increasingly heated and more difficult to breathe in. After a few more minutes of struggling to even barely keep up with her, he stopped to gasp for breath. He felt dizzy and suddenly very thirsty and the heat... Gods the heat! He collapsed and began to realize that the place smelt strongly of smoke, but there was no sign of a fire anywhere. Even his hand was beginning to burn. What was going on?

He looked up from the ground with bleary eyes and the woman was standing before him again smiling. "You better hurry, if you don't, you won't have much time."

"Time? What do you mean I do not have much time? I can't chase after you any... any... gods I am so very tired. Please tell me! Why am I tired?"

...

He awoke to a burning sensation in his left hand. He didn't open his eyes at first, but the pain only intensified. He opened his eyes, and even though his vision was blurry he saw that his glove was on fire and beginning to move up his gauntlet. He let out a yell, yanked the glove from his hand and began to hit his gauntlet against the hot dirt until the fire had been extinguished. He let out a low groan and tenderly held his burned hand.

Despite the pain, his mind was flooded with thoughts of the life he had once lived. The dream he had had was nothing new, but it never helped to quell the deep longing and guilt that came with it. He had never been one to wish for things he knew he could never have, but a part of him would always want nothing more than to return to the home that had been taken from him. He had tried to let go of the bitterness to all the things that had happened to him and to how close he had been to being home only to realize that it had all been too late. He closed his eyes and tried to push back the overwhelming sadness that was pooling up inside of him; he knew he needed to get up and check his surroundings.

He opened his eyes again, and from where he lay, he could see the opening of a cave to his right barely a stone's throw away. Even though he could not see past the opening, it looked cool and inviting compared to where he lay. It felt like hot sand against his skin, but on closer inspection he knew it to be mostly ash. Small streams of fire streaked on the ground like cracks on broken glass. When he stopped to think about it later he was thankful that he had ended up on solid ground instead of in the fire completely. To his right, the rock wall of a steep cliff rose high up into darkness. Darkness.. Was it

night? Had it not been daylight when he had fought the fiend while fleeing the castle? The fiend!

With a start, he turned over and forced himself into a sitting position and grabbed desperately for his sword that was partially buried in the ashes beside him. He expected to see the fiend charging toward him, or waiting to deliver a finishing blow, but as he looked around there was not fiend to be found. What he did see however, was enough to drown out the thoughts of anything else.

The ledge before him dropped away, and in the distance barren landscapes rose and fell, mountains towered over their valleys, and streams of fire flowed like rivers from holes in their sides. Great beasts flew around a peak of one nearby. At its base looked to be a town or refuge of some sort. He wondered if the town had been there at the fall, or if something or someone down there had built it? What amazed him the most was the sheer expanse of the underworld itself. It seemed to go on and on endlessly. Even looking up, he could see no ceiling, only blackness.

The amazement was quickly replaced by the waves of heat radiating around him. He realized with dismay that breathing was harder than normal,

and his throat felt as dry and barren as the ash around him. He reached for his canteen that was still tied to his belt, and drank greedily from the water within. The cool water flowing down his throat felt like liquid life, and with it his head became clearer. He remembered all the events that had happened previously and concluded that the fiend or the stone must have transported him somewhere, and this somewhere could only be the underworld. He felt in his pouches and in the sand around him, but found no trace of the stone.

With a defeated groan, he accepted that the stone was lost and dearly hoped that it had not fallen in the enemy's hands. Had his efforts only resulted in losing the stone and bringing him here? If so, had the monster slain the others? Perhaps they were able to be successful where he had failed.

After a moment of weighing his options, he pushed himself up and managed to stand on shakier legs than even he had expected; had the fight drained him that much? Slowly, he made his way to the ledge and looked down. The face of the ledge was nearly straight down and with no hand holds that he could see. The rock was covered in ash in a similar fashion to where he stood and even if they had been handholds, he doubted he would be able to

find them without slipping to his doom. So, he turned, gathered up his cloak to keep it from catching ablaze and hobbled over to the cave opening he had noticed earlier, silently cursing his weakness as he wiped sweat from his face.

“Looks like I’ve no choice but to hope this cave offers a way down.” He realized he was talking to no one, but decided he really didn’t care at this point. He carefully stepped around the small streams of fire, narrowly avoiding catching his boots on fire numerous times before reaching the dark opening. Even up close he could see no further into the cave than an arm’s length away. He looked back at the fire and scoffed at his stupidity. He tore a strip of cloth from his cloak and wrapped it tightly around the end of his dagger. He then dipped the tip of it in the liquid fire and watched as the tip of the blade and the cloth glowed with its heat.

He wiped away the sweat burning his eyes again, and holding onto the leftmost wall of the cave for balance, made his way inside. The walls of the cave looked to be of the same rock as outside and he wondered with dread if some creature had not carved this hole for its home. A part of him wanted nothing more than to leave the cave and either attempt to climb down the rock face or save time

and jump to his death. Were they not all the same outcome? Regardless, he pressed forward. The cave sloped downward, at times dropping a few feet sharply down before continuing on.

For the first few drops he managed to make it down slowly, but successfully. Upon arriving at the fourth, his vision has become blurry, and he didn't see the drop until he was already falling. He hit the round with a hard thud and a low pained groan; He ached all over and his hand throbbed mercilessly. For a time he didn't even bother trying to get up, the effort required in doing so was something he could do without. In the end, his worry that something might find him there helpless to defend himself was enough to get him moving again, albeit even more carefully this time. He pushed himself down and forward, deeper and deeper into the cave for what had to have been hours but knew that he had probably only covered a mile at most. How far did the cave go?

A little while later and further down, he noticed with amazement that the rock was beginning to look man made. The carved rock was giving way to laid blocks and brick. The steep ledge drops were now decrepit stairs. After making it down only a few flights of these, the cave widened into a large tunnel

that split two ways. The left path seemed to keep going down, while the one on the right leveled out.

He took out his flask and drank from its depths trying to clear his head enough to figure out which way to go. He sat in between the two openings and closed his eyes, pouring a little of the water over his head, relishing in its coolness. The path leading down would surely lead to the bottom of the mountain if he were lucky that is, not that luck had been on his side recently. The other path he wasn't sure about. Perhaps it lead to a storeroom or an underground city of some kind? Even if there was people living there, who was to say they would not kill him on sight? He made up his mind and started toward the left path.

Upon closer inspection he noticed a sign at it entrance, but could not understand what it said. He began down the path anyway, but heard the sound of something falling from behind him. He jerked around, sword ready but desperately hoping there would be no fight. Fortunately, he saw nothing but a few pebbles skittering across the floor. He walked back to the opening of the path and listened intently. It was faint, and in his current state he couldn't be sure but he thought he heard light footsteps in the other pathway. He really didn't want to find out

what creature could making the noise but also knew that he needed to find out what he was against; please let the footsteps have come from something close to human, he hoped, heading cautiously down that path.

The stonework in this path was much more delicate, and if he didn't know better he would swear he had seen the style before. Had he? He shook his head and drank more water; he had to clear his thoughts and focus or he would become food for whatever was down here. The path stayed straight and clear for a while, but it soon changed in a way he did not like. Unlike the paths up to this point that had been barren, bones and charred pieces of equipment and clothes were scattered around the floor as if people had desperately been trying to escape, but had been killed quickly. He stopped and inspected one of the skeletons propped against the wall. Upon touching its skull, the bone turned to dust and caused the rest of the bones fell away. "Well, at least this wasn't recent." He commented. In the pile of bone dust he could see a faint yellow glimmer. He reached into the pile and pulled out a small yellow shard. "What is this?" He asked himself. He know there would be no answer, so he

pocketed the shard and decided he would try to find out later.

Again, he heard what he was sure was light footsteps around a corner further down the passage. He pushed himself back up and followed after it. He wondered briefly what he hoped to accomplish when and if he finally found whatever had made the noise; he was fairly sure even a child would be able to best him in his current state.

The passage opened up into a large chamber. On dusty marbled floors, massive columns stood in rows as far as he could see; the chamber itself was lit by stone torches that lined the ancient walls. He didn't know how they could have stayed lit for such a long time, but, even with the light of the torches, he could not see the ceiling or the other ends of the chamber. "How can a place as massive as this exist underneath a mountain?" Rasler asked, his voice echoing throughout the room. "Where do I go from here?"

Mere moments after he spoke, a deep rumble came from further down the chamber, followed by the crash of a large stone falling to the floor. He desperately hoped that the crash had come from a part of the ceiling falling on its own, and that with

any luck something down here was not strong enough to knock down one of the mighty pillars. He shined his torch on the dusty floor and saw a trail of small footprints leading toward the left of where he now stood. He wasn't the greatest of trackers but they looked to belong to a woman, or at least a person with small feet.

He began to follow them, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw something black snake its way around the back of a distant column, knocking a small stone across the floor. He could feel his heart racing as he tried to see what it had been. "Is anyone there?" he asked, but his echo was the only reply.

Again he saw movement, and drew his sword. He walked toward it a few steps and listened again. *Maybe you should run... like the coward that you are. You have no place here, you are not wanted.* Where had that thought come from?

A low hissing sound began to emanate from the direction the creature had went. Could it be a serpent? He thought. As if in answer, a rumbling growl rolled throughout the chamber, and from the darkness a pair of large golden eyes began to move toward him. "What in the god's hell is that?" He asked, steeling himself for battle. As it moved

closer, he could see black scales covering the creature's long snout, with sharp teeth, and jagged spikes along the top of its head.

“A Dragon!” he exclaimed, taking a few steps back. He watched in horror as its mouth began to glow orange and only barely managed to scramble behind a nearby pillar as fire billowed past him, its heat nearly suffocating. “Gods! A true black dragon of old! I was a fool to come here!” The fire died, but the embers remained burning on the ground enough to light the room further. He could see the dragon in its entirety. It looked to be about forty feet long and stood twice as tall as he, though its head was not fully raised. Spikes ran along its back and tail. He was fairly certain that those spikes were more than sharp enough to slice him in half. Its wings were probably also massive, but in the chamber he felt fortunate that it did not have the room to extend them.

He quickly moved from behind the column he was standing at, and rolled behind one closer to the dragon being careful to avoid another blast of fire that would have turned him to ashes. He looked down at his sword that was shaking in his grasp. “What am I doing!? Even if I wasn’t exhausted, I would not be able to kill it on my own!”

Deciding it was too late to turn back, as soon as the fire stopped, he charged toward the dragon with all the energy he could muster and leapt in the air bringing down his sword as hard as he could onto its head. Sparks flew, but aside from a very shallow cut, the dragon only grew angrier. It whipped its spike covered tail toward his legs, but he managed to notice it in time to jump over it without a moment to spare. He clumsily and desperately went in for a second attack, but the dragon quickly slashed its massive claws and cut deeply into his arm, sending his blade clambering across the chamber.

If I run now it will kill me. He thought. *It doesn't matter, you're going to die either way. Why not get it over with more quickly by just giving in?* a voice beckoned in his mind. He yanked his knife from his belt with his other arm, and swung at it a second time, managing to gouge the dragon's eye. It let out a loud screech of agony and whipped its tail around again, this time knocking Rasler across the stone floor, one of the spikes stabbing deeply into his leg in the process.

The pain was overwhelming. It felt like a fire had engulfed his leg, which he knew must be poison, and it took every ounce of willpower he had to remember that the dragon would be on him in

moments to finish the job. Using his good arm, he scooted across the floor away from the dragon. He did not take his eyes off the dragon that was coming out of its anguish and was beginning to look for its prey again. He dragged himself backward as fast as he could, but knew the dragon would have no trouble closing the distance. Hope had almost left him until his hand landed on the hilt of his sword. “What are the odds?” he laughed deliriously.

The dragon stomped toward him and lifted its claw to deliver the finishing blow. Rasler thrust his blade with all the strength of a man knowing he’s going to die. Before he lost consciousness from the pain and heavy weight crashing into him, he felt his blade pierce the dragons flesh deeply between its claws and he heard the dragon screech in torment as everything faded into a blinding light.

He awoke in what he thought surely must have been only a few moments later. He was relieved that he could hear the dragon tearing its way through the packed earth in the distance. His arm and leg ached fiercely, but miraculously, he found that he could move his arm again. After a few miserably failed attempts, he also found his leg held his weight easily. More than this, he couldn’t believe that somehow his bleeding had mostly stopped. Could I

have been out long enough to have healed? He wondered.

Maybe you ARE dead. Your soul is trapped here and you won't admit that you have been slain like a helpless child. He let out a defeated sigh. "I thought perhaps it was the dragon affecting my mind... But I was wrong... It seems I am slowly going insane."

Even though it still hurt to walk, he knew it was a fatal mistake to stay somewhere so open. So, he forced himself to walk to the edge of the chamber where he had seen the footprints head.

He knew he wouldn't be able to catch up to whoever had left the footprints with his fatigue growing by the step, but stubbornly decided he had come too far to collapse now. He trudged for what felt like an eternity until he came to the leftmost wall and saw a large single door that had long since rotted and now hung in tatters on its rusty hinges. It was ajar enough to squeeze through, but he was sure it would collapse if lightly pushed.

He had expected it, but was still surprised when he saw the remnants of a small camp in the middle of the room. Old fabric was littered around the room and broken and rotted tables were piled against the wall. In two corners, doors led to undoubtedly more

rooms. In the center of the room, fabric had been piled into a makeshift bed and the remains of a small fire smoldered next to it. He collapsed onto the makeshift bed and resolved to wait for its owner to return. His weariness and overall pain disagreed with this plan, however, and within minutes he was falling asleep. He faintly registered that bare legs were coming toward him, but he didn't care. His mind drifted into welcomed unconsciousness.

13. Fight or Flight

When he awoke, he felt much better. He wondered for a moment where he was and how he had gotten there but it slowly came back to him as he sat up. It was impossible to tell how long he'd been asleep, although it had to have been a while for him to wake up feeling this much better he reasoned. Hell, even his hand had stopped throbbing. He looked down at it and noticed for the first time that it was wrapped in a piece of cloth that had been neatly, if not hurriedly, tied. So, sleep wasn't the only thing responsible for better condition.

“I don't know who you are, but I believe you mean me no harm, and I want to thank you for healing me.” He said, hoping they would be able to hear. Seeing as how they had chosen to heal him instead of killing him, he decided to take it further in hopes that he would get a reply. “In truth I have been following you, at least I assume it was you that I followed. I have no desire to hurt you, I merely wanted to find out who you are and whether or not you had been sent to kill me. Since it is obvious you do not intend to kill me, perhaps we could make

each other's company? If only to make our survival a bit easier?"

Until he had said it, he had forgotten that there was a possibility that whoever was down here could be accustomed to this place and have no worries for survival in the same ways as he did. He waited and looked toward the dark corners of the room where he knew the doors had been, he swore he could barely see a pair of eyes looking at him, but he heard no reply, only faint breathing that could have very well been his own. He was beginning to wonder at the possibility that whoever it was could not understand him at all. Perhaps they now thought he was threatening them? In the end he figured it was worth the gamble.

"I don't know if you can understand me, but I have no desire to deceive or hurt you. My name is Rasler, though many have called me Edrick. I do not know this place and wish only to make it back to where I came from." He made no move to stand up and tried his best not to appear threatening in the least. At last a small cracked feminine voice from where he was sure they were standing answered. "You.. Your name is Rasler?"

He was both relieved and surprised, but tried not to show it. “Yes, that is my name. Might I ask yours?”

“I.. How did you get here?” She asked.

He didn’t like giving answers without getting any, but perhaps she was still afraid of him? “I would prefer you show your face, but alright. I will answer the best I can. I and two others fled from a place called Alexandria. We managed to make it to a city called Treno, but discovered that it was empty save for a fiend of vicious power. We tried to defeat it, but its power was beyond us. So, I was forced to use an object that I possessed to try to turn the battle in our favor. Unfortunately, the object has a mind of its own or the fiend’s power was too great and instead, I was transported here. The object is long gone!” He finished with an exasperated chuckle.

As he finished, she stepped out of the shadows, and he could scarcely believe his eyes. Truly, things made a lot more sense now.

“Garnet! You ARE alive!” he exclaimed in surprise. He had never talked to her in person and had only seen her in passing, but he was certain it was her. There was no doubt in his mind. The necklace had worked after all, well sort of.

Her face was streaked with ash and dirt, her eyes were red and whatever makeup she had been wearing was beyond ruined. Her lips were cracked and her hair was matted in quite a few places. He thought she looked horrible for lack of a better word; her dress that had once been white was stained brown with dirt and ash and was ripped off from her lower thighs down. Her bare legs and feet were covered in scratches and a generous coating of dirt. If he didn't know any better he would say she looked to be hanging on by a thread; her actions only confirmed this.

She quickly came toward him and dropped hard to her bare knees in front of him, her face desperate and questioning. "What happened to Alexandria!? And-and who left with you? Please, I have to know!" She pleaded. By no means had he planned on being the one to tell her what had happened, but at the same time he couldn't help but pity her. "Alexandria is no more. It sank into the earth, if there was anything left it has surely been consumed by fire." He could see the fragile thread inside of her that she had been holding on to snap, and she cupped her face in her hands and sobbed.

He thought she would stop in a moment or two but when she didn't let up, he wasn't sure what to

do. He had never been good at comforting others but he sighed and awkwardly placed his hand on her shoulder. "I am sorry, the blame is not yours. Nothing could have been done to stop it. Most of the people were already gone when I arrived at the castle, I did not see it happen, but it must have happened quickly. Zidane wanted to look for people that were still alive but—" he was cut short when she jerked up and grabbed his arm. 'Zidane! Was he...?' she trailed off but he knew what she was asking. "He and Captain Steiner were alive and fighting with me when I was transported here. With any luck they are both alive and well."

He could see the relief wash over her and she looked as though she might lose consciousness. He reached for his canteen and handed it to her. "Have you had water? Drink and then you can tell me how you arrived here as well." She nodded weakly, and took it from him but guiltily stopped drinking after only a few small sips. 'Don't worry.' He smiled. "The spell engraved on the canteen allows it to hold much more water than we will drink for a long while, so have as much as you like." With this reassurance, she started gulping the water rather unladylike and closed her eyes when she was finished. "I am sorry to say that we are not as

fortunate when it comes to food. I have a little jerky and two small loaves of traveler's bread I will share with you, but if we do not find something edible soon we will be in dire trouble." She nodded and accepted the jerky and bread gratefully after he had retrieved it from his pack. They sat in silence for a while and he did not pry for her to tell him her story but instead sat patiently only glancing at her from time to time.

At last she told him of Damian, how he had entranced Beatrix and finally of how she had thought she was going to die but instead she had woken up in a room not far from here. He pondered this and the rest of her story for a while. He saw that she was desperately trying to stay awake. "How long have you been stranded down here?" he asked with concern.

"I.. I don't know... maybe a week?" She answered, unsure. "I found some water jars in a room not far from here.. but there wasn't any food."

"You must have been starving." He noted.

"I um.. I wasn't really hungry..." She replied.

He told her to try to sleep, that she would need it if they planned on journeying from this place. She

had reluctantly agreed; now he sat sharpening his blade and wondered what power this Damian possessed that would allow him to take control of the general so easily as Garnet tossed and turned fitfully in her sleep. He pitied her, but he knew there was nothing he could do.

Time passed and he thought he heard footsteps coming from the chamber outside. These footsteps were much louder than hers had been, and even though they were still a ways off they were definitely headed in their direction. His pity was forgotten and he grabbed her arm, shaking her roughly away. She shrieked and tried to pull her arm free. “Wake up! We’ve no time for this!” he hissed. At last she broke free from the clutches of the remnants of her nightmare and looked at him in confusion. ‘We’ve company! Who else was down here with you?’ Her face paled and she sat up quickly looking at the doorway. “I haven’t seen anyone else down here.”

Rasler groaned. “I was afraid you would say that. Perhaps they are—”

“Garnet! Your majesty! I know you are in there! Why do you keep me waiting love?” A voice bellowed from the chamber. He could see her face

visibly pale upon hearing the man's voice. He was sure there could've been more than one person she feared, but he had a pretty good guess at who the voice belonged to. "Damian?" he asked simply. She nodded and stared toward the door.

"Look, if he is as strong as I suspect he is, I won't be able defeat him on my own." Rasler started as he observed her condition. "I know you're not in any condition to fight, let alone use any more magic, but I need your help."

"If you don't come out, I am afraid I will have to come in there!" Damian laughed.

She looked at him worriedly. "You are no doubt traumatized by what happened to you, but if you want us to make it out alive you'll have to move past it, and you will have to trust me as Zidane did."

....

He turned and walked as sure footed as he could from the small room toward the direction that the footsteps had come from, with Garnet keeping a little ways behind him as requested. As the pair moved further along the chamber, he could see the silhouette of presumably Damian walking toward them.

As they drew nearer, he could see that he was dressed as one with great wealth and that he carried a very ornate sword to match. The man wore a smug grin and spread his arms as if to give a welcoming embrace. “Allow me to personally welcome you to the underworld.” He greeted, with a theatrical flourish.

“Forgive me if I don’t kneel in gratitude.” Rasler replied sardonically, stopping at a distance he deemed far enough away from him.

The man dropped his arms back to his sides, but his grin did not fade. “I see you have no sense of humor. Oh well.” He glanced behind Rasler toward Garnet. “Ah, I see you’ve found my lovely bride to be that has a habit of running off. I can only assume you are the one responsible for that little inconvenience.”

“I can only assume that you are Damian, one of the fiends trying to destroy Gaia.” He countered coldly. “What made you think you could just take and destroy anything you want without someone standing in your way? Are you that ignorant or just that full of yourself?”

Damian laughed mockingly, but did not seem fazed by his comment. “Stand in my way? Hardly.

You fools are barely an inconvenience. Though I suppose I must give you credit for the necklace bit; that was rather clever. It would seem however, that I am at a loss. You know my name, but yours eludes me.”

“My name is Rasler, perhaps you remember me?”

“I’m afraid not. Should I?” He asked innocently.

“Well, you surprise me.” Rasler started. ‘I would have taken you for a man that would hold a grudge against the ones that sealed your kind away for all these years.’ This time Damian’s grin fell. “Well damn, it looks like I hit a nerve.”

“How in the hell are you still alive!?” He snapped.

This time it was Rasler that grinned. “When we sealed the underworld, we sealed ourselves away as well.”

“You little shit!” He sneered, but then promptly collected himself. ‘No matter, we are far stronger than last time, and you are obviously far weaker! As for your little friends, they are already playing right into my hands! But you! You, Ill deal with myself.’ He did not draw his sword, but stepped closer. “Don’t bother trying to run off again my queen; you

won't get very far. I have great fun in mind for you as soon as I kill this pest."

Garnet stepped from behind Rasler, and readied the knife he had given her. "No! You won't be killing anyone!"

He feigned being hurt for a moment. "You poor thing, I only wanted to help end your suffering. Do you really think that knife will help you? Did you forget what happened last time? Perhaps if you had your precious Eidolons? Though I'm sure by now you've realized they can't hear you all the way down here." He laughed.

She may have looked exhausted and frail at the moment, but her eyes burned with anger and a readiness to fight. "You... You scumbag!"

"Mmm... Don't you just love fiery women?" Damian laughed. "Well what are you waiting for Dear? Give me your best shot!" Garnet started to run forward and attack him, but Rasler grabbed her roughly by the arm and pulled her back.

She shot him a look of confusion that clearly asked what he was doing. "Let me go!" She pulled, but couldn't break free of his grasp. "Let me go! Let me go—"

“Shut up! You wench!” Rasler barked, and turned his attention back to Damian. “You’re right. I’m not strong enough to defeat you. So, instead I want to make a bargain.”

Her look changed from confusion to anger and fear, as his betrayal became painfully obvious.

You want the girl!? Come and take her, then you will leave me be!”

“Just like that?” He asked, his face and voice full of skepticism. “Do you expect me to believe you’ve had a change of heart and that you will just hand her over?”

“Why the hell would I want her? She’ll be nothing but a pain in my ass! Honestly I think I’d rather die than spend another day listening to her whine!” Rasler replied, giving her a look of despise. “So, let’s make a deal. I will give you her free and clear, and you let me go. We will both live to fight each other another day.”

“But I... You are.. I trusted you! Please.. Please don’t do this!” She pleaded, but Rasler paid her no heed, instead he roughly tightened his grip on her upper arm. ‘Do we have a deal? If not I may be tempted to kill the wench myself.’ He finished,

drawing his sword and bringing it toward her throat. “Perhaps we would both be better off I did kill her myself? I despise Fiends like you Damian, but I’ve learned to tolerate them. It’s weakness that makes my stomach turn. And her weakness spreads like a plague!”

Damian stared at Rasler for a moment, searching for a sign that he was bluffing, but after a moment he smiled in satisfaction. “Perhaps you and I are not so different. Or perhaps being sealed away changes a man. Hmm? Either way, you have a deal Rasler.” He walked forward and reached out his arm to take her, but as his fingertips touched her skin, Rasler roughly threw her to the side, sending her sprawling across the marbled floor. He wasted no time as he grabbed his sword with both hands and thrust it quickly and forcefully into Damian’s heart.

He couldn’t help but let out a breath of relief he hadn’t realized he’d been holding as he felt his blade penetrate. The only thing that made it even better was the short moment he was able to see the surprise on Damian’s face.

However, as quickly as the satisfaction of victory had come, it was gone. He watched in disbelief as Damian disappeared in a small cloud of mist.

“Damn!” He quickly looked all around but the only person he could see was Garnet still on the ground with a look of equal disbelief.

A few feet from him, he began to hear clapping and turned to see Damian leaning against a column.

“Bravo! Bravo!” He cheered mockingly. “What do you take me for? A fool? I won’t be tricked so —”

Rasler threw his knife toward his head, but Damian raised a hand and stopped the knife mid-flight. It floated in the air mere inches from his face. “Easily. You’ll have to do far better than that.” He flicked his wrist and sent the knife flying back in Rasler’s direction. He swung his sword and knocked the blade away; it stabbed into a nearby column. *Why did you not just let him kill you? It would have ended your suffering.*

“Not bad!” Damian laughed.

Rasler quickly charged at him and swung his sword, but only felt stone as he disappeared again. *It is pointless to resist death, let the darkness consume you.* “Damn you! Show yourself, you coward!” he yelled in frustration. *Yes, give into the anger that burns inside you.*

“Alright.” Damian replied, standing again a few feet from him. This time he drew his sword as well. “If you’re in that much of a hurry to die, it would be rude of me not to oblige you. You are ready to die aren’t you?”

It was strange, he had been dead set on killing this fiend of a man, but now.. Would it really be so bad if he let him win and end it all? A part of him didn’t like where this was heading. He watched as Damian came within striking distance, but chose not to take advantage of the opening.

“That’s what I thought. You don’t really want to fight me. Do you?”

He stood there lost in thought no longer seeing Damian, As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he had a point. Why was he doing this anyway? He didn’t give a damn about the queen, let alone the others, did he? But then, why had he even bothered? As he thought about the fight in Treno, and all that he had lost to the underworld before, it suddenly dawned on him that not all of the thoughts in his head were his own. He snapped out of his daze suddenly as Damian’s blade flashed toward him. With not as second to spare, he caught the blade

with his own. How had he gotten so close without him noticing?!

He didn't have time to think more on it as Damian pulled back his blade and attacked again. He was now fully alert and caught the blade a little more easily. "I understand you now, Damian. You don't just talk with a silken tongue, you quell our own thoughts and poison us with your own! You feed the flames of people's fears and guilt until it consumes them! But I see you now and I will not allow you to control my mind!"

He saw his opening as Damian attacked him again. He caught his blade but instead of trying to knock him back as he had been, he deflected the blade to the side enough to free his own and deliver a small cut to Damian's upper leg.

Damian snarled, and picked up his pace, unfazed by the cut. He lunged at Rasler, who barely managed to raise his own sword in time to block the attack. He had not expected the attack to be so quick! How much had he been holding back, toying with him? As soon as he blocked one blow another came just as quickly. He ducked to avoid a slash to the neck, and planned to do another strike of his own, but Damian kept forcing him to block his attacks

instead, and they just kept coming! He couldn't make any ground as each attack not only came quickly, but also with enough strength to nearly jar his sword loose from his hands. With each blocked attack he felt the impact travel through his wrists and down his arms. He lost track of how many attacks he had blocked, but after a while Damian merely stopped.

"Had enough?" Damian asked a breathless Rasler. He had sweat running down his face and was struggling to keep his balance, but his eyes still showed the same determination as they had before.

"Never." He breathed tiredly. *But you have had enough. You have suffered far too much.* The thoughts continued to come.

"Stubborn are we? Or perhaps you're losing your mind?"

"Maybe I am, but you're the one that forgets." He replied with a tired grin.

He gave a look of confusion. "Forgets what?" But he didn't have to wait for an answer, as suddenly the tip of a knife stabbed through his chest. He looked down at the knife and back at Rasler. "I'm not fighting alone."

He let out an inhuman screech and dissipated again into mist, leaving Garnet standing there in surprise. “But I... I thought he was real that time.”

He moved beside her and looked desperately around as well. “He had to have been. Whatever he actually is screeched in pain, but that knife wouldn’t have killed it.”

“How right you are!” Damian exclaimed. The pair turned wearily to see him standing nearby, but were a little relieved to see blood still running from a hole in his chest. ‘You may have wounded me... a little, but your little tricks won’t save you.’ He laughed. “I would finish killing you myself but I grow tired of this game, and besides, it would be rude to finish you when my pets are positively starving. I’d run if I were you, though it won’t do any good.” With an evil sneer, Damian again disappeared.

Rasler looked at Garnet. “Are you alright?”

“I.. What did he mean by his pets are hungry?” She asked, her face now full of worry.

They stood frozen for a moment, listening. As they did, the answer soon became dreadfully clear.

They could hear a screech from the other end of the chamber. No, many screeches.

Garnet's eyes widened as many tapping noises joined the screeches and sounded to be rapidly coming toward them.

“Run!” Rasler yelled, grabbing her arm again and pulling her into a run with him. As the sounds grew nearer and much louder, the pair frantically tried to run even faster. Her feet burned from their speed, and would surely be bleeding by the time they were finished. She cursed herself again for having not worn her boots to all of her meetings in the first place. She swore to herself, if things ever returned to normal, she would never, EVER go without them again. Not only did her feet hurt though, but only when she tried to keep up with Rasler did she truly realize how exhausted she really was. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't keep up. Rasler had to constantly slow down, or pull her forward. But, once she saw what was chasing them, all thoughts of being exhausted left her in an instant and she prayed only that she could run faster.

She could only guess that it was some kind of cross between a giant spider and a scorpion. One of them would have surely have been terrifying on its

own. But was there just one? Oh no, there were dozens if not hundreds.

They could see the path Rasler had entered through, but the creatures were getting closer by the second! She could smell their poison now, and just the stench of it was enough to make her lightheaded. The sound they made was deafening. They were so close, but there was no way they would reach the door in time, was there? *Relax.. There will be no pain, only a peaceful slumber..* She didn't know where the thought had come from, but she began to slow down as her mind clouded again. It had been doing that a lot lately... Was that singing she heard? It sounded so peaceful.. and she was so tired..

"Dammit!" Was that a voice she heard a voice yell in the distance? It couldn't be, she was alone..

Something grabbed her, and she was faintly aware being carried. Or was she dreaming?

14. Into The Looking Glass Pt 1 Revised

Rasler stood gasping for breath as the creatures beat and collided against the iron door, the wood barricade shaking in its clasp. Had he been a few seconds slower! He wiped the sweat from his face and tried to calm his racing heart. What had happened? He asked himself again. Was she just that exhausted? He doubted it. She had been running very well considering she was barefoot and exhausted. She had had trouble keeping up with him, but that was to be expected with her being shorter than he. But why had she just stopped? And just a few yards from the door at that?

He looked at Garnet lying unconscious against the wall where he had dropped her. As much as he didn't want to admit it, he knew exactly what had happened to her. It wasn't just him that the voices plagued. He too had been more than a little tempted to stop and let the fiends consume him. Could the fiend called Damian's hold truly be so strong? And with such a long reach? He wondered idly if there were other fiends already at work to destroy them. Could one fiend control so many creatures and still

hold an influence over their minds? He hoped not, but the alternative was equally unsettling.

He looked at her grudgingly and reluctantly resigned himself to carrying an unconscious Garnet out of the chamber, back through the dark tunnel he had followed her through, and along the path he had previously dismissed that he was confident would lead downward and out of the sunken citadel. He cursed at having to carry her, but was thankful that she was light.

As he passed the bone dust again, his mind returned to the yellow crystal shard he had collected earlier. Could the shard be a means of leaving the underworld? He decided it was something he needed to think about later. He came to the second pathway and it did indeed continue in a rough downward spiral. To say he was thankful that there were no sheer drops along the path was an understatement, as his arms already burned from her limp weight. Every yard he went, it felt as though she grew heavier. It frustrated him that he wasn't able to wipe the sweat from his eyes. He was already drenched in sweat from his fight with Damian and the flight afterward. The heat from her skin certainly didn't help the situation either. He momentarily wondered why he hadn't considered just leaving her behind.

After a while, and a few hundred steps down he finally passed through a stone arch that opened up into the lands at the base of the mountain. There were no flames nearby, and the heat had released into something close to tolerable. After settling Garnet beside the stone archway, he was finally able to wipe the sweat from his eyes and drink deeply from his canteen. He was starving, had been for a while, but knew it to be not only unwise but possibly fatal to eat any more of the precious little they had already.

His head pounded relentlessly and in an oddly satisfying way he felt delirious as he looked at the ancient pathway before them. It was cracked and broken, nearly covered by ash, but he could tell it lead straight ahead nonetheless. What had he planned to do if he ever made to where he was now? He had fooled himself into thinking he was prepared, but he knew that now to be a lie. He had no idea where to go from here. Should they follow the path and hope that it led to somewhere that could help them get to the surface? If they did make it out, what then? The stone he had had was now gone, and it was very doubtful they would be able to find the others in time to use their power to seal it away again. What kind of fool had he been to think he

could go up against the entirety of the Underworld a second time when he had only just gotten lucky the first time?

He stared at Garnet as she began stir from her unconsciousness. “I guess we’ll take it one step at a time. By some miracle we might even succeed. But at what cost?”

...

“No.”

“But—”

“No.”

“But you said—”

“I don’t care what I said!” Rasler yelled in exasperation, wiping the sweat from his forehead and looking back at the raven haired woman. “We’re almost there, perhaps only a few leagues from the town, resting now would be futile.”

Garnet let out a tired groan, and tried pointlessly to wipe away her sweat as well, only managing to streak her forehead with more dirt. Gods what she wouldn’t give for a nice hot bubble bath! “My feet are killing me!” She complained. She didn’t even want to look at her feet as she knew they had to be

bleeding by now. She had tried to wrap a cloth around them but it had kept falling off and making her trip, so she had just resigned to walking barefoot.

“You will be fine.” He reassured indifferently.

“That’s easy for you to say, you’re wearing boots!” she countered.

“What do you want me to do about it?” He asked, irritation clearly beginning to take hold. “Just try to take your mind off the pain and focus on something else!”

“Fine, where did you come from?” she asked.

He sighed, not liking that her attention had shifted back to him. “I told you, I am from Ivalice.”

“Was it a lot different than Alexandria and Lindblum?” she continued, now genuinely curious.

This caused him to slow down a step. “It was.. Yes, it was much different.”

“How so?” she pried.

“It was.. more advanced. Cities were much larger and airships were innumerable in the sky. Machines were becoming even more predominate than magic.

Though even magic was a little different. People could travel from place to place almost instantly using these... yellow crystals.” He trailed off and reached his hand into his pocket thoughtfully.

“What’s wrong?”

“We will make it back to the surface, Garnet. Of that I’m sure now. But we still need to see what is at that town.” He replied calmly.

“How can you be sure that we’ll get out?”

“I just am.” He retorted. “Pick something else to think about.”

She huffed frustratedly, but kept quiet for a while. Surprisingly it was Rasler who spoke first.

“Did you move my sword?”

“What? I haven’t—” She started defensively but he cut her off.

“When I was fighting the dragon and it knocked the sword from my grasp?”

She looked at the ground guiltily. “I.. I tried to help you by summoning, but for some reason I can’t feel them anymore.. So, when your sword went flying I picked it up and was going to bring it back

to you, you were already crawling toward me. I didn't notice how injured you were until I saw the trail of blood you left when you crawled."

He nodded, the previous events finally making sense to him. "So, I'm guessing the bright light I saw was also your doing."

She let out a small chuckle. "I tried to use Blind, because I thought it might give me enough time to heal you, but as soon as soon as I did it, it ran off. I guess it had been in that dim room for too long."

"You're quick on your feet, there aren't many knights that would attempt to take on a dragon unarmed. It seems I haven't given you enough credit. Perhaps that is why Tribal fell in love with you."

"What do you mean?" She asked, her voice portraying her curiosity. She hoped it only portrayed curiosity as she felt her heart speed up a notch.

He gave her a light chuckle. "The boy is damn near hopeless without you. He was willing to fight me for leaving you behind, even though it was not my doing."

She couldn't help but smile as she tried to picture it, but also felt sadness and worry that he was up

there somewhere and she was stuck down here. Even if Rasler was right and they made it out, what might happen between now and then?

The pair returned to silence until arriving at the town, only to find that it was completely deserted. “You said that you and the others sealed away a massive army of fiends and monsters” Garnet commented thoughtfully. “But all we’ve seen is Damian, the dragon, and those creatures. But as many of them as there were, that wasn’t a massive army.”

“Yes, I agree. So where is everything else? There hasn’t been a sound since we ran from the creatures, and from the looks of it, this town has been empty for quite some time.” Rasler noted.

“But, if the army isn’t here, then that means—” She gasped.

“That the army is loose, and no doubt already headed toward Lindblum.” Rasler finished.

“We have to help them!” She exclaimed.

“Would that we could. Do you have some hidden means to destroy an entire army?” he asked sarcastically.

“Well no, but—”

“We need to focus on destroying the ones responsible. If I’m going to die, I want to at least take those bastards with me.” He cut her off again and began walking further into the abandoned town.

She scowled at his back for a moment for cutting her off again, and angrily hurried after him. “Gods! You’re just like Amarant! If not worse! What is wrong with you?”

He ignored her at first, as he had on more than one occasion, but finally turned to face her. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.” She challenged, refusing to back down.

“So you want the truth then?”

“Yes.”

He ran his hand through his damp hair and glared at her before looking away. “There is a darkness in me Garnet, something I can’t control. I’ve tried to keep it at bay, but ever since arriving in the underworld, the only thing I feel anymore is anger. In truth, the only reason I’m helping any of you is because of a promise a made a friend and I hold to it only because I know it to be right.”

“So, you don’t care about anyone....at all?” she asked with disbelief. Rasler began to walk away again. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters!” She exclaimed as she hurried after him.

“How so? I used to think that if you cared enough, you could right the wrongs in the world and that darkness could be defeated, but I was a fool and you are too if you believe that. There is no victory. There is no happily ever after. We may yet find a way to seal the underworld but there will always be something else that comes after and makes it meaningless.”

Dagger shook her head. “You can’t mean that.”

“Believe me, I can. Not everyone has a heart of gold.”

She continued walking behind him and tried to preoccupy herself with their surroundings. This was the true definition of a ghost town. Aside from the fact that most of the buildings were still standing, all of them were decrepit. Many of the buildings had holes in their walls big enough to walk through. The only thing that could have been remotely recent was the thick layer of ashes that covered everything like

snow. Had the whole town been transported to the underworld only to be destroyed? She didn't even want to think about what had happened to its people.

Her thoughts were silenced when Rasler suddenly stopped, causing her to bump into him. "If there's anything of great value, I'd wager it's in there."

She looked past him, and noticed that he was eyeing a large black stone structure with a single stone door at its center. Stone gargoyles sat on each corner of the square structure. It looked almost like a tomb, but she doubted they would have built a tomb in the middle of the city. Most of the other builds were built from wood and hand laid bricks, but this building looked as though it had been carved from a single giant piece of marbled stone. Even with all the ash around, its sides were near spotless.

The pair walked up the few stone steps at its front and stood before a smooth door, though now she wondered if it really was a door. It was smooth as glass and had no handles or latches. She watched as Rasler felt around on its surface, and gave it a few testing shoves to no avail.

"How are we going to get it open?" Garnet asked. "There must be some way to get inside."

“I don’t know.” He answered tiredly. “But you’re more than welcome to try.”

She looked around carefully, but couldn’t find anything that could have been used as a switch. “Maybe there’s a password or something?” she asked hopefully.

“If only it were as simple as saying we wish to enter.” He replied, wondering what the password might be if she were right.

There was a loud creak and the pair stared in disbelief as the door did indeed creak open at his words, allowing entry into the dark chamber. A faint light pulsed below as if welcoming them inside.

Maybe they really were being drawn in? Maybe it was the chance they might find something that could help them? Either way they found themselves helpless to do anything but walk slowly inside.

They went down the dust covered steps into a room with walls that must have been ornately decorated at some point, but now was covered in endless cobwebs. Bones of soldiers littered the floor, their dropped weapons long forgotten. There was no smell in the room; time had stripped all smell away. Shadowy mists still lingered within and moved

toward them and swirled about their ankles as they walked. A few of the skeletons that were still whole rotated their skulls on their ancient spines, watching their unwelcome guests. The light from outside the tomb grew smaller and smaller as the doors closed silently behind them.

But none of these things interested them. Instead, their eyes were affixed to a large magical orb in the middle of the room. Its many glows dancing on their faces.

“That-That can’t be possible!” Garnet whispered quietly.

“It would seem that it is.”

What had at first been a globe filled with aimless swirling colors, now showed none other than Garnet herself, only she was in no tomb. Instead, she was talking to Regent Cid alone, all the while holding a knife behind her back

“I-That’s not me!”

“Then the only conclusion is that there are now two of you, or at least someone that has done a near perfect job of imitation.”

“What if this is just to trick us? You said we can’t trust everything down here.” She asked hopefully.

“This orb looks very old, I have never seen one myself, but I believe from what I have read before that it is a seeing stone. Though the tome I read gave no indication that any still existed.”

She was curious what else might be in the tomb, but still could not take her eyes from the image she was seeing. The version of herself still had not done anything with the knife but why did she have it? The only answer that made sense but also made her sick to her stomach was that she intended to kill her uncle.

“They won’t let that thing kill Uncle Cid, there will be guards checking in soon, they have to!”

“Why would they?” Rasler asked.

She shot him a desperate questioning look before he continued. “I think you know the answer. Do the guards normally disrupt meetings between you and your uncle? No, if she intends to kill him, she will. I only wish we could hear what they are saying before she finishes the job.”

“Can you at least try to act like you care?” She asked in frustration. “There has to be something we

can do, I can't just stand here and watch my uncle die!" She yelled and hit her fist against the orb's glass. The image in the orb shimmered for a moment then returned to normal. She stepped back from the orb, but drew close again as she realized she could faintly hear their voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying.

"I think it reacted to your touch? Try placing your hand on it." Rasler suggested. She hesitated only a moment before placing her hand firmly on the glass. The glow from within intensified, and she could now hear them clearly, it was as if she were standing only a few feet behind them.

"I know how heavy this must weigh on your shoulders, but until we know more there's nothing we can do." Cid stated apologetically.

Garnet walked closer and stood beside him. "Don't worry about me, I'm much stronger than I look." She replied comfortingly.

"Yes, you have always been a very strong girl. Your mother would have been proud of you, as I am. I just can't help but to worry about you sometimes."

"Thank you, really. But shouldn't you be worried about yourself instead?" She asked, walking a few

steps away from him while moving the knife to hold it against her chest.

“What do you mean?”

From the shadows of the room, the real Garnet watched her twin with bated breath for what she intended to do, and how she might prevent it. Rasler also watched, but with mild curiosity. This time she did not attempt to hide the knife as she turned back to the regent. His eyes widened as his gaze fell on the knife, and he took a few hurried steps back “No!” He exclaimed.

“All the warnings in the world, and you humans still couldn’t see the true threat right before your eyes.” She scoffed.

“What have you done to Garnet!?” he yelled, hoping the guards would be able to hear.

“You speak foolishness uncle, I am Garnet! You don’t recognize me? Have you fallen ill?”

“Guards!” he yelled. He had not believed that the threat would come from someone so close to him, a mistake that was beginning to seem fatal.

She laughed a deep cynical laugh that by no means matched her small frame. “I don’t suppose it

matters that you know the truth, you will not make it out of this room alive!”

He looked around desperately for something that he could use to defend himself as she stepped closer. Upon realizing that the room was empty of weapons or anything else useful, he stopped moving and stood tall and proud. “Even if you kill me, Zidane and the others will stop you and your kind.”

“What a sad choice of last words, you fool, the others are clueless. They don’t even realize that the door to the underworld is not in the tower, it’s the storm that lies on Esto Gaza, It’s already grown far too powerful to stop and the Underworld will not be sealed again! So no, they won’t stop anything! But, I’ve wasted far too much time on you, goodbye Uncle.” The imposter lunged at him, and stabbed him in the chest.

“No!” Garnet screamed, and for a moment but only a moment before the orb faded to black, she and Rasler saw her hurriedly turn toward them. This didn’t help her feel any better though, as she beat her fists against the orb’s glass-like surface.

Whether or not the creature that was trying to steal her life and ruin it had heard her, now that the orb had faded to black, it was obvious that none

could now hear her desperation or her screams, only Rasler and the mist that had begun to engulf them from the start.

Neither of them had noticed the mist that had filled the tomb, and its presence eluded them even as their consciences faded to black.

15. Into The Looking Glass Pt 2 Revised

She could hear a choir of birds chirping softly outside the castle window as they perched on the stone balcony railing. Outside of her royal chamber, maids could be heard going about their morning tasks. They always tried to be quiet, but after journeying with Zidane and the others for so long she had become a very light sleeper. Queen Garnet Til Alexandros opened her eyes and saw the light velvet canopy of her bed swaying gently from the breeze that drifted through her open windows. Groggily, she stretched and pushed back the silk covers. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up.

Her head pounded and a strong sense of lightheadedness came over her as she tried to remember what had happened the night before. Why couldn't she remember? Had there been a royal party and had she drank too much wine? She ran her hand across her forehead and found that it was covered in sweat and dirt. She blinked at it in confusion, but after a second look she realized there

hadn't been any dirt. Gods, was she seeing things now as well?

"Your Majesty, are you awake?" Beatrix called from the doorway, as she gently cracked open the door.

She didn't know why, but she felt a great sense of relief at hearing Beatrix's voice. "Yes! I'm awake and starting to get dressed."

"Would you like some help fixing your hair?" she asked nicely.

"Um.. not yet. Maybe in a few minutes. Am I late for a meeting?" She asked.

Beatrix smiled bemusedly. "No, you don't have any meetings until this evening. Are you feeling well?"

Garnet shook her head. "I'm fine, I just have the strangest feeling I'm forgetting something important."

"It's probably nothing, maybe you should take the day to relax? I can tell them you want the meeting postponed until tomorrow." She laughed.

Garnet couldn't help but smile in return. "Thank you, Beatrix. I think I will. I just don't feel like

myself today I guess.” She then looked around the room thoughtfully. “Do you know where Zidane is? He’s normally not up this early.”

Beatrix looked at her sorrowfully. “I take it you don’t remember what happened yesterday?”

She felt dread creeping up her throat as Beatrix continued.

“I know you hoped that he would return during the play, but I am saddened to say that he did not. I am sorry your majesty, and forgive me for being blunt but I think it’s safe to say he died in the Lifa Tree.” She finished.

“No! That’s not true! He came back for me and he—” she started defensively, but was politely interrupted.

“I am sorry your majesty, but after the play you retired to your chamber with a full bottle of wine.” Beatrix cast a knowing look at the empty bottle on the edge of the bed. Garnet looked at it guiltily. Was it true? Had she just gotten drunk and imagined the whole thing? Had Zidane’s return just been a deliciously cruel dream? No, it wasn’t true! Her mind screamed. She remembered Zidane. She remembered clearly how they had talked the night

after he had come home, the way he had held her, the way..

Her head swam and it felt like the whole room was spinning. She closed her eyes and tried to remember.

“No! That isn’t me!”

“Well, I think that’s kind of obvious.”

“We have to do something to help him!”

As her memories flooded through her head, she looked at Beatrix and desperately reached for her, but as she did all the colors twisted and melted away. The grayed silhouette of Beatrix faded further and further away. She closed her eyes tightly and fell to the floor as a foreign pain shot through her.

..

Upon opening her eyes again, the room was very much different and she suddenly felt a lot weaker. The only light came from an orb in the middle of the room. Had she been here before? She tried to sit up, but to her horror, something was holding her wrists and legs. She looked and let out a panicked screech as she saw that skeletal hands had grabbed her, pinning her to the floor. She yanked against their

hold, but to no avail. She began to panic, but luckily remembered that undead creatures hated white magic. So, she steadied her mind as best she could, and forced a simple cure spell through her tired arms and into the skeletal hands. There was no screech or attack from more of them as she had expected, but instead the hands simply cracked and dissolved into dust. She quickly scrambled away from what was left of them being careful to look behind her until her back touched the solid brick wall of the room.

She tried to calm her racing heart and to remember what had just happened. She knew Alexandria had been a dream, but before then? They had come down here hoping to find supplies, then they had found the orb. The thoughts of what they had seen threatened to bring tears to her eyes again, but she willed them away. It was then that it occurred to her, where was Rasler? Had he left her to die? But, she realized she knew the answer.

She crawled across the floor and not far from where she had been trapped, there lay Rasler in a similar fashion as she had been. She willed the magic into the skeletal hands again with a similar result, only he did not wake up. She tried to shake him awake, but as she did, the room began to spin again.

When everything steadied and she could see clearly again, she couldn't help but let out an amazed gasp. She had always thought Alexandria to be the most beautiful kingdom, with its beautifully detailed statues and perfectly manicured gardens. But, she found that its beauty paled in comparison to this. All of the floors were delicately carved marble. The castle walls were pearl white and showed not a single blemish. This particular hallway she had suddenly found herself in, ended at a beautiful granite archway with intricately carved flowers. As she walked under it, and her eyes adjusted to the bright light, she realized that she was in a massive indoor flower garden.

Feeling almost as if she were floating, she walked to a nearby flower and dropped to her knees. It was unlike any she had ever seen, and breathtakingly beautiful. Its petals looked as if they flowed with fire, with a bright yellow lightning bolt thrown in on each petal just as a bonus. If its looks weren't enough, she found it smelled heavenly. A girl could get used to this, she smiled.

She got up and walked further into the garden until she spotted a blue flower this time. She decided it was even prettier than the last. It was light blue, no, ocean blue. At the tips of its petals, however, it

faded into a delicate white with little swirls on each petal. Thinking about the white, she smiled happily and looked around the garden intently until she found what she was looking for. At the corner of the garden stood her favorite: a white rose bush that climb up a garden trellis nestled against the castle wall. She gently touched one of the petals, causing golden pollen to fall into the air.

Yes, she decided, if she ever got the chance and of course assuming Zidane wanted to marry her, she wanted white roses at her wedding. She let out a light chuckle as she tried to picture Zidane in a tux. Would it be in a garden like this one? Or would it be more romantic to have it on a beach somewhere with only their closest friends as an audience? She could almost feel the sand between her toes and the smell of the ocean waves as they gently crashed onto the sandy shore. She was sure blank would be Zidane's best man, and Beatrix would be—

She stopped herself and hung her head sadly. Who was she kidding? Things would never go back to the way they were... even if they somehow saved the world again, and they could rebuild Alexandria, would she even want to still be queen? The people might still accept her, what was left of them anyway, but a part of her just wanted to be free again. To

revisit a lot of the places she had liked when they had all journeyed together. She even missed riding with Zidane on his reckless treasure hunts. She sighed, since when had the choice ever really been hers? As her thoughts turned back to Zidane again, she could almost see that Thing pretending to be her. It was no doubt getting to spend the nights with him, walk closely by his side during the day, and be held when—

She angrily stomped the white rose she had been holding, but instantly regretted it as a thorn entered her foot. She begrudgingly sat down and picked it free of her skin and scowled at the now trodden rose. She no longer liked this place, and decided it was time to find Rasler and return back to where they actually were. She did have to admit that she hadn't expected his dream place to be this beautiful, but where was he?

He wasn't in the garden, and as she walked through the hallways, though she couldn't be sure which ones, she wondered if perhaps he was in the throne room (wherever that was). Maybe he dreamed of someday becoming king? It certainly suited his personality she thought bitterly. After going up a flight of stairs, a few dozen more hallways, some of them leading to dead ends, she

saw him standing at the railing of a balcony. But, not just him. Beside Rasler stood a beautiful woman with short blond hair wearing a dress not too dissimilar to the one she was wearing. Before she had ruined it, she mentally added.

Being careful not to disturb them yet, she carefully crept along the wall until she was close enough to hear them. “Rasler, I know you think it’s your duty to fight in this war, but the people need you here! I need you here!” she pleaded.

He looked at the ground, his face full of guilt. “Tell me, if I am not willing to risk it all and fight on the front lines, how then can I expect our soldiers to? They have family and loved ones as well. Are my wants and desires more important than theirs? And how can they be expected to have courage in the face of a greater enemy, if the ones leading them hide away safely in a palace?”

The woman shook her head and Garnet thought that she was crying. “You are not yet king, they don’t expect that from you! What will they do if you fall in battle? What then!?”

He sighed heavily. “When I married you, I swore that I would always try to be the man you needed me

to be, not only that but I would be the man this kingdom needed.”

The woman scowled at him. “Don’t mistake your pride for my needs or those of the people!”

He backed up a step from her at this comment as if startled and turned looking out into the expanse of the city. Garnet wondered what he was thinking as he didn’t say anything for a few moments. “Pride?..” he started at last. ‘Maybe I am just being prideful.’ His voice was heavy, as if he carried a great burden. “But does it matter?”

The woman’s anger changed to a look of confusion. “What do you mean?”

He turned back toward the woman, and Garnet was more than a little surprised to see that he was crying. With a sad smile, Rasler reached up and stroked the woman’s cheek. “For years now, I’ve relived this same conversation... It doesn’t matter if I said I would stay with you or any other thing that I thought might change the outcome of what happened, when I wake up you will still be gone.” Her look of confusion didn’t change. ‘I know I should let you go, because even if this wasn’t a dream I know in truth I would still make the same decision and it would always end the same. I should

let you go, but in the end.. I just can't. This dream... it's all I have left of you. It's all that's left of the man I used to be.' She looked at him disbelievingly and backed up from him. "I understand.." he nodded at her. "I hope that one day you can forgive me."

Garnet look at him with a newfound empathy as he turned back and held on to the railing again. She watched the woman's confusion and disbelief faded into almost an expressionless stare. "Rasler.." the woman beckoned. "Come home to me..."

He sighed deeply and turned back toward her, this time his gaze and expression looked like the one Garnet had grown more familiar with. "I'm sorry, I can't keep chasing you. At least not this time." To Garnet's surprise he then looked directly at her. "Let's go, Garnet. I have no desire to stay here any longer." She started to reply, but the now familiar feeling of dizziness returned and when she blinked, she was back in the dim room lying next to Rasler.

He got up and dusted himself off, but did not look at her for a few moments. So, she too got up and started to dust herself off as well, but realized the pointlessness of it. Instead, she looked back at the orb which now showed only the random swirl of colors. "I think we should try to use the orb again,

maybe I can use the orb to warn the others about what we saw. When you, rather the fiend that looked like you, killed the regent I think she almost heard you for a moment. Perhaps if we both hold the orb they will not be able to tell that we are an illusion, that being said. It may be best if they do not see you right away; it would be best not to alert your twin just yet.

She thought about it for a moment, and even though she doubted they would believe the imposter, she decided he probably had a point. “Alright. But we need to be more careful so we don’t start dreaming again.” She cautioned, giving him a knowing look.

He regarded her and her words before replying. “Agreed.”

As the pair touched the orb’s surface, its green glow once again swirled and erupted into a ray of colors. The colors formed and solidified into what Garnet guessed was a view of one of the streets in Lindblum. “I guess this is a start.” He commented.

They watched for a few minutes as people came and went, not recognizing any of them. Was the stone showing them something else? As they were

about to remove their hands, Zidane, Marcus and Blank stepped into view.

“Zidane!” She gasped.

She would more than likely said more, but remembered that she had agreed to stay quiet. “Can you tell who is with him? Keep in mind that may also not be the Zidane you knew.”

She shot him an angry glare, but simply answered. “I can’t tell from here, but I’m pretty sure that’s Marcus and Blank.” He nodded, then looked intently at Zidane. ‘Tribal!’ he called, but only earned a slight chuckle from Garnet. “Why can’t you call him by his first name?” Rasler sighed and returned his gaze to her. “At first I did it to sound more like a noble, but now I guess its just habit. Does it matter?” she only grinned. “I think you’ll have to concentrate with me, let’s try again.”

Both he and Garnet focused intently on the image inside the orb. At first nothing changed, and he thought that maybe he had been mistaken about the power of the orb, but suddenly he had the sensation of falling, he closed his eyes as wind and a wave of colors rushed past him. When he opened his eyes again, he found himself standing in a doorway veiled in shadow. He felt a strange sense of

detachment as he took a step forward, it was as if he were moving but standing still at the same time. He turned around and strangely saw garnet holding the orb as if he were back inside the room again. He turned back toward Zidane and the others, and noticed with frustration that they were already beginning to leave his field of view. “Going somewhere?” He called from the doorway loudly enough that they would hear as he did not trust his new disembodiment enough to try and chase after them. Luckily, they spun around after hearing his voice.

“Rasler! You are alive! What are you doing here!?” Zidane exclaimed accusingly, and drew his dagger. The others following his lead. He honestly hadn’t expected them to be so provocative, if they were copies, would they not try to make him drop his guard with kindness?

“Tread carefully, Tribal.” He replied, his face betraying his stress. “There’s no need to draw your weapon. We are allies, are we not?”

“Allies!?” Garnet jumped in angrily, stepping out from behind the others. ‘You are the one responsible for this!’ He studied her for a moment and was more than a little surprised at how perfectly she mimicked

the real Garnet. Had he not been traveling with real garnet, he would have sworn it was her too. Thinking about this, he turned back and saw that she looked to be near crying in frustration and worry. “Whatever happens, do not lose your concentration.” He couldn’t hear what she said in response but after a moment she nodded resolutely, so he turned his attention back to the others.

“Well... this is certainly a surprise.” He commented, eying her carefully.

“Why did you do this, you scumbag!?” Zidane growled. “I know you’re working with Damian, So why in the hell did u even bother helping us out of the castle; what are you playing at!?”

“He wanted you to trust him so that they could use you like he tried to use me!” Garnet answered.

That explains that, he thought. “I don’t recall asking your opinion on the matter, Your Highness.” Rasler responded dryly. “Shall I bow in respect, or kneel in servitude at your presence?”

“How dare you! You—” She started again, but was interrupted by Zidane. “What are you doing here Rasler!? We won’t let you do anything to Lindblum!”

“I don’t believe I have done anything against you Tribal, but then I’ve always been a bit slow on things like that.” Rasler started, not taking his eyes from the girl in the orange overalls. “My father was the first to point it out. Either way, I’m not in the mood for a chat. So, I suppose you all want to fight me now? Well, if it’s a fight you’re after, come to Esto Gaza, to the eye of the storm. I’ll be waiting for you. There, you will get your answers!”

“Why don’t you tell us now?!” Zidane countered.

“What are you doing?!” Rasler heard clearly from behind him. He turned to see Dagger glaring at him angrily. “We have to tell him that’s not me! What if it suddenly tries to kill them?!”

“I’m trying my best, Garnet. Do you really think that revealing the fiend’s deception would do anything but get them killed? In case you’ve forgotten we’re still in the underworld!”

Her glare softened into a look of worry. “What are we going to do? I can’t let it hurt any of them like it did Cid!”

“Right now our only option is to keep their attention on me, even if that means making them think I am their enemy. Do you disagree?”

“No..” she answered dejectedly. “But how are we going to get to Esto Gaza?”

“Trust me, I will get us there.” He finished, and turned toward the others one last time.

“Even If I said that I have done nothing but try to help you, would u believe my words?” He asked. “I doubt it. But, as I’ve said things have gotten more complicated than you know. I’ll see you in Esto Gaza, Tribal. Don’t keep me waiting.” He didn’t give Zidane time to respond, as he stepped backward and broke his concentration. When he blinked, he was back in the room beside Garnet.

“What do we do now? What if that thing decides to kill Zidane and the others?” She asked worriedly.

“We can only hope its attention stays elsewhere.” He replied. “As for what we do now, we need to prepare ourselves.”

“What do you mean by prepare?”

“You need proper equipment and training, and I need to regain my strength if I can.”

“Maybe we should see if there are any weapons in here?.” Dagger suggested.

Rasler looked around the room wearily and turned toward the hallway leading further in. “It’s as good of a place to start as any. Stay close, we don’t know if there are any traps waiting for us or not.”

They carefully made their way down the dark corridor until they reached a heavy steel door. With their combined strength, they managed to open it despite its rusted hinges. They were thankful that the place was deserted, as the screech the door made would have surely alerted the entire town. Rasler walked into the middle of the room and noticed that several different types of weapons lined the brick walls with another rotted wooden door at the back. He made a mental note to help her find one that she could properly use, then pushed the door open.

Garnet followed him into the narrower room, and inside were many different pieces of clothing, uniforms, armor and most importantly, an assortment of boots all lined up neatly along the wall. He moved out of the way for her as she immediately went for a pair of black low cut boots, they weren’t heavily armored as many in the room were, but the sides of them had been inlaid with what could have been leftover mythril used in chain mail. She felt as though she could almost cry in relief that they were exactly the size she needed.

She began to put them on immediately, but was interrupted by Rasler. “Before you do that, I suggest a change of outfits. That dress, or what’s left of it, won’t keep you alive very long in the cold of Esto Gaza.”

She looked down at herself self-consciously as if noticing the dress for the first time. With everything she had been through lately, she hadn’t even noticed that her dress, which had been her favorite, was now barely more than brown rags. A few weeks ago she would have died if anyone had seen her in such a state. Zidane had been the only one to see her in any state of undress, and even then that was in a room shrouded by nightfall.

“I really don’t care what you wear, I just don’t want to be responsible for you dying because of something as stupid as the cold, that being said, you also need something that won’t suffocate you while you’re down here or inhibit your movement during battle.” He threw her a small pile of fabric and metal. “Try that on, it looks to be your size. I believe it was used by female assassins of some sort.”

She held up dark maroon pants that looked rather ordinary save for the buckles at both the thighs and lower legs. They seemed to be very close fitting, as

her overalls had been. The fabric on the other hand felt different than anything else she had encountered. Despite the fact that the room was sweltering, it felt cool to the touch.

She looked up and was going to ask him for some privacy, but found that he had already went into the other room. So, she stripped of her ruined dress, and after a few minutes of loosening and tightening the buckles she found that he had been right, they did fit her well. She picked up the vest that obviously had went with it, as it was made of the same color and type of material as the pants but also had a layer of light and surprisingly comfortable chain mail underneath. Though it didn't have any sleeves, it had the same type of buckle at the bottom to keep it from rising up. The outfit as a whole was much more likable than she had expected, and despite the fact that it was heavier than her dress had been, she actually felt much cooler. She did wonder how it was going to keep her warm at Esto Gaza, and again wished that she had been able to bathe before putting it on.

“I believe whoever made them enchanted it with a magic that keeps the wearer cool in hot climates and warm in cold ones.” Rasler answered from behind her, making her jump.

“H-how long have you been standing there?” she asked, accusingly.

“I didn’t watch you dress if that’s what you’re asking; you’re not the only one that needed new equipment. I also found something else that I believe will be extremely helpful.” She was thankful for his indifference, but it still unnerved her just the same.

“What’s that?” She asked as he held an oddly decorated bracelet. Its pattern on the band looked to match the outfit she was wearing, but symbols she had never seen also joined them and gave off a faint yellow glow.

“I think it matches the outfit you’re wearing and is undoubtedly enchanted with some magic, but you will have to put it on to see what that magic is. She hesitated for a moment, then took it from him and slipped it onto her left wrist. As she did, she watched in amazement as her skin turned a few shades darker. She looked up to find Rasler staring at her in amazement.

“Wha—” On instinct she had begun to ask him what he was staring at, but found that her voice was different as well!

“Now that’s a very valuable artifact indeed.” He commented with a laugh. “You look decidedly very different.”

She looked at her reflection on a suit of armor that stood in the corner. She nearly jumped when she saw the woman looking back at her. She now had long blond hair, almost the same shade as Zidane’s she noted, and green eyes which you didn’t see very often. Even more than her hair and eyes, her face was less rounded and she thought she looked at least a little more intimidating. “This is going to take some getting used to.” She remarked, her voice now deeper than hers had ever been.

Rasler shrugged. “Yes, well it solves quite a few problems for us. You don’t have to wear it all the time, as long as you don’t take it off anywhere near your darker counterpart we just might be able to twist things into our favor and learn some valuable information.”

She nodded and took the bracelet off, returning to her normal self. “What do you plan to do when we meet Zidane and.. that thing?”

He could see the hopefulness in her eyes and he hated to disappoint her, but he had no idea how they were going to defeat the fiend that had taken her

identity, let alone how they would defeat the others if they intended to kill them. “We’ll just have to try to keep the Fiend’s attention without it killing us until we can figure out what it’s planning, and I promised Zidane a fight, so I’m going to do my best to give him one. If he kills me, I guess we’ll know if he’s who we think he is. For now, let us worry about getting you a weapon.”

“You mean there are some rods here?” Her voice came out a little more hopeful than she had intended.

“No, there’s not any rods or staves.” Rasler noted as he gazed around the dimly lit room thoughtfully. “You’ll have to use something else.

A look of apprehension crossed her features. “Those are the only weapons I’ve ever used. Zidane tried to teach me how to use his dagger once, but I wasn’t very good at it.”

He sized her up for a moment thoughtfully and reached for two red tinted daggers. “Unless you want to learn to use a rapier, of which I’m a lousy teacher, you’re going to have to give it another try. I mean no offense, but you hardly have the strength to block a direct attack from a powerful foe, so you’re going to have to make speed your ally instead.”

She looked at them with trepidation as he handed them to her. “Take them; I will teach you to wield them to the best of my ability. You probably won’t be able to stand toe to toe with a seasoned fighter but when we’re finished you will be able to hold your own in most situations.”

With reluctance, she took them and strapped the holsters to her lower back in a crisscross pattern as he instructed her. She didn’t think it would be comfortable, but found that aside from the weight she barely felt them there, and the length of her arms made it effortless to grab the handles of both knives and pull them free. Though it did take her more than one try to release the clasp that held them smoothly as she drew.

“I know we haven’t a lot of time, but I believe you being properly equipped and trained may just be the key to our survival.” He added. ‘After we are finished, I believe we can use a crystal I found in combination with the orb we found earlier to get to Esto Gaza almost instantly.’ She wanted to tell him that she really doubted she would be able to do anything without her Eidolons or magic, but instead she just nodded and decided she would try to stay positive. Maybe she could do it? Feeling sorry for herself and relying on everyone else to fix things

had never helped her before. It was time to grow up. She could do this! “When can we start?”

“You continue to surprise me.” He laughed, and motioned her out of the door. They walked a stone’s throw from the structure to a place that was relatively flat and clear of the sharp rocks. Despite her determination, she could feel her nerves trying to get the better of her, and it took more effort than she felt it should have to push them back down. She could do this.

Let us start off simple. For now, let’s work on your dodging. I’m going to attack you, but do not draw your weapons. All you have to do is not let my blade strike you. Do you understand? “he asked, drawing his sword.

Again, she didn’t reply but instead nodded. She could do this, she had been in many battles before... I can do this.

“Good.” With no further warning, he lunged at her. Moving as quickly as she could, she managed to avoid his strike. She felt proud of herself, that wasn’t so har—

He swung at her again. She barely managed to pull herself back in time as she felt the tip of his

blade leave a small cut on her left cheek. She gasped and brought her hand up to her now bloody cheek. She shot him a look of disbelief, but he only responded with cold indifference. “We don’t have time for you to be taught delicately, Garnet. The reason Zidane could never properly train you is because he would never risk hurting you. I have no intention of injuring you gravely, but if there is no risk of injury, how then could you be prepared for someone that wishes nothing more than to kill you? If you are not ready, perhaps we should focus on restoring your magic and hope that your eidolons return to you?”

“No. I’m ready.” She replied firmly. He could tell by the fire burning in her eyes that she wasn’t going to quit. He lunged at her again, and as he suspected, she dodged. He wasted no time, after recovering his footing he swung as he had before. This time, his blade met only a few strands of hair. He decided to push her further and picked up his speed. He did a vertical slash, and she moved to the side, he reversed his blade into a horizontal cut and she ducked. He lunged his blade again and she twisted sideways to avoid it. He continued attacking her until he was forced to stop and catch his breath, which was coming much harder than it had been before.

Catching her own breath, she looked at him worriedly. She knew there was more that he wasn't telling her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He panted. Seeing how unsteady he was on his feet didn't help her feel any better, but she chose to remain silent. "Do you think you are able to cast any white magic at all?"

She looked down at her hands and back at him. Despite her exhaustion, she figured she might be able to use a few cure spells, but nothing that would be powerful enough to really help him. "Maybe something small." She offered.

"There will be times when you must block an attack, there may be no other choice. I'm going to come at you again, faster, and I want you to try casting protect, but not on yourself as most white mages do, instead push the magic into your blade. Blocking my attack will still be strenuous, but I think you'll find it manageable. So, dodge all that you can, and block the rest of my attacks."

She nodded, and he waited until her daggers began to glow with a faint light. Rasler then slashed, thrust and swung at her with all the speed of someone intent on killing her, but the more she dodged, the easier she found his attacks to avoid.

She used her blade only when she was sure she couldn't dodge his attack, and though she almost lost her grip a few times she managed to avoid being injured. That being said, she hoped he stopped soon. Gods how her muscles burned! After only a few more moments he did stop, and not only that, but collapsed onto the dry ground. "Are you okay?" she asked again, becoming even surer that he was anything but well.

"I'm alive aren't I?" He answered as he gasped for breath and struggled to stand. He took out his canteen and greedily drank the cool liquid then handed it to her. She did the same, having not realized how thirsty she had gotten. 'You learn quickly.' He commended. "Now it's your turn Garnet."

With this statement her anxiety she had felt earlier returned.

"Come at me with everything you've got." He commanded.

I can do this.

16. Esto Gaza

A/n: To save confusion, from this point on I will be referring to the real Garnet as Dagger unless she chooses a new temporary nickname or another character chooses otherwise, while “The Imposter” will be called Garnet. I hope you enjoy the chapter! If you do, please R&R!

Zidane watched her as he sat on the bow of the airship against the railing, tail hanging limply over the edge.

She was still just as beautiful, there was no doubt about that. Those orange overalls and the way they accented her curves still taunted him to no end. He could hear her angelic voice drift across the ship as she talked to Steiner. They weren’t really talking about anything he didn’t already know, though he was sure he heard Steiner say something about Rasler.

Had Rasler been their enemy from the start? He wondered. Sometimes, he could still feel phantom pains where the Lifa Tree’s roots had surely impaled him. Would Rasler have gone to all the trouble of bringing him back just to toy with him? That seemed

to be the case, but for some reason it just didn't sit well with him. What good would it have done him to help defeat one of the fiends that was on his side? No, he had always went with his gut, and his gut was telling him that Rasler wasn't behind this. Maybe Damian had only said that to pit them against each other? That sounded much more likely, and that would mean that his surprise earlier had actually been genuine. So then, what had he wanted to discuss?

"Shit.." he breathed. All this thinking was giving him a headache. When had he started thinking about things so much? He had always been one to act and then think later, so what had changed? Blank had called him a sulky little bitch, and even though he'd never admit it, he was probably right.

He looked toward the storm in the Distance that was ever growing larger as they flew toward it. They would be there in about an hour. He turned his attention back to Garnet and decided that was reason he was thinking so much. She looked and acted as she always had, but he still didn't understand why he had first thought there was something wrong with her. Even now, he just didn't feel the desire to go over there and spend time with her. He knew they probably wouldn't get another chance to be alone

together after landing, but here he was sitting on the front of the ship by himself.

He had intended to keep an eye on Ramza, but after watching the poor man throw up twice over the railing, he had decided that the man in question had no intention of doing any ill will toward them. Hell, he was the one that seemed to be miserable. Speaking of Ramza, he was holding onto the railing for support and now walking toward him.

“Am I the only one that doesn’t like flying?” He asked, dropping down and sitting near him. He still looked extremely nauseous, but seemed to be keeping himself together at the moment. “I hope I’m not bothering you, but I thought talking to someone might distract me from the flight.”

“Nah, you’re fine. Vivi used to be terrified of flying too.” Zidane laughed at the memory.

“Is he comfortable with it now?” Ramza asked, genuinely curious.

“Uh.. He overcame pretty much all his fears before he..” Zidane trailed off. The pain he had felt when Vivi had stopped returning.

“I’m sorry.. I didn’t realize.” Ramza apologized. “I had heard that he was much different than the

other black mages, though in truth I know very little about them. He must have been very dear to you.”

“He was like my little brother.” Zidane replied simply, remembering all the memories they had shared.

“I don’t mean to be blunt, but what about you? Are you alright?” Ramza asked suddenly.

“What do you mean?” He replied,

“Well I.. I was there when Rasler brought you back to life. I truly did not believe he would be able to do it, but I was wrong. I’m sorry I haven’t had the chance to talk to you sooner, but I’ve been meaning to ask you if you felt any different; not so much physically, but mentally. Do you feel like yourself?”

He studied Ramza for a moment trying to read what he was implying. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t mean to worry you, but to my knowledge, a single stone has never been used to that extent before. I never disagreed with Rasler’s reasoning for bringing you back, but I worried that it would cause some unforeseen side-effects.” He explained

“What kind of side-effects?”

“I don’t know if he told you, but he used part of his own life to return yours. Before he helped you, he looked at least five or six years younger. I only worry that he unintentionally gave you more than life energy and if the stone could have changed you in other ways? As they often have minds of their own.” Ramza answered.

This only seemed to confirm his thoughts that it wouldn’t have made any sense for Rasler to have brought him back just to toy with him. Even Kuja wouldn’t have been cynical enough to give up part of his own life just for some amusement.

“Why did he bring me back?” Zidane asked, again trying to read his expressions.

“He said he thought we would need you if we had any chance of resealing the underworld, but even though that’s true, I don’t think that was the reason.”

“Then what do you think was the reason?”

Ramza’s expression fell to one of sadness. “He has lost a lot.. And he has a lot of regrets. I don’t know many of them, but I do believe he’s trying to make up for some of them before he runs out of time.”

“Before he’s out of time? You mean before he dies?”

“Well, not exactly.” Ramza answered, As he noticed Zidane’s look of confusion he continued. “From what I understand, Rasler died a very long time ago.”

“Holy shit! You mean he’s undead!?” Zidane exclaimed.

Ramza let out a laugh that he didn’t expect before answering. “No, he lives and breathes at the moment. At least he did when I last spoke to him.”

“Then what the hell are you talking about?” He countered.

“It is.. Complicated. He is both alive and dead, but also not undead. I don’t know how myself, but I guess the best way to say it is that something is keeping him alive even though he shouldn’t be. But, whatever that thing is, is getting weaker or running out. When it does, I don’t think he will die; I think he will simply fade away or just stop existing.” Ramza finished, sounding unsure.

He didn’t really know how to reply, but he now understood why Ramza had been worried. If Rasler

died or no longer existed, the same might happen to him as well..

“What about you?” Zidane asked suddenly.

“Me?” He laughed. “I’m nothing special, I just never learned how to stop fighting. Much like you from what I’ve heard.”

Zidane scratched the back of his head sheepishly, and turned from him long enough to glance at Garnet, who was leaning against the railing and staring off into the clouds, her long dark hair blowing in the wind. What was she thinking about? He doubted it was about him, but did he blame her? Maybe she was taking the loss of her kingdom a lot harder than he had first thought?

“You love her deeply, don’t you?” Ramza asked, though it didn’t sound to be a question at all. “Go to her, you may not get a chance to talk to her alone again for quite some time.”

Zidane couldn’t help but grin, maybe Ramza wasn’t so bad after all. “Yea, I think I will.” he replied as he jumped up and walked toward her.

He stopped at the railing beside her, and casually lent against it. “Something on your mind?”

At his words, she snapped out of the daze she had been in, and smiled at him warmly. “I could say the same thing to you, you’ve been distant lately.”

“I’m sorry.” He apologized, “I guess I just haven’t felt like myself lately.”

She shook her head dismissively. “We’ve all been through a lot lately, but at least we still have each other.”

He felt moved by the genuine warmth in her words and as she moved to hug him, he welcomed her eagerly. After a few moments of holding her tenderly, he pulled back from her slowly. “I have no idea what’s gonna happen when we get to Esto Gaza, but we’ll find out together and we’ll do whatever we have to stop anyone else from getting hurt!”

He saw a glimmer of doubt in her eyes, but she nodded in agreement. “I believe in you Zidane. We’ll find a way.”

“How touching.” A hard voice from behind them commented. The voice sounded neither sarcastic nor genuine; in truth it held little to no emotion at all.

Zidane turned quickly, drawing his dagger from its sheath. From the corner of his eye, he could also

see Ramza drawing his sword despite his queasiness. At the very front of the bow stood a man wearing a Green cloak that concealed most of his features save for an outfit not too dissimilar from the one he had last seen Rasler wearing. The man had not drawn any weapon, but instead seemed at ease if not mildly amused.

“Easy, I have no intention of killing any of you, at least not at the moment.” The hooded figure warned. He raised his arms up as if to show that he had no intention of drawing the blood red katana at his side.

“Then who the hell are you!?” Zidane growled.

“Let’s not worry about trivialities shall we?” He replied calmly. “What’s more important is what I want.”

“And what might that be?” Ramza asked.

“For now, only to help you.” They couldn’t really see many of his facial features, but they could faintly discern that the man was grinning.

“Why should we trust you?” Garnet jumped in accusingly. He eyed her carefully, but his grin never faltered. “I don’t suppose you can, but then you

don't really have a choice do you? Because, without my help you could not possibly kill Damian."

"You would help us kill him?" Zidane asked, his voice layered with skepticism.

"As a matter of fact, I would." He replied, and withdrew an ancient looking pair of shackles from his vest. He sat them down gently on the wooden deck and backed up a few steps. "Simply holding those shackles near him will give you the edge you need to destroy him."

"And you're just going to give them to us?" Zidane countered sarcastically.

"Yes, but I recommend you be careful with them, as they're the only pair in existence."

"What do they do?" Ramza asked, eyeing them hesitantly from a distance.

"They keep anything near them 'Shackled' to the dimension they are in, though they have a few other uses if worn. Use them or don't, either way it is of little consequence to me." A blue ring of light appeared behind him, and he turned from them. "Do not think this makes us allies, I just have plans that are a bit different to theirs." With no further

comment, he stepped into the blue light, and was gone.

Ramza carefully picked up the shackles and looked at them closely.

“Do you have any idea who that was?” Zidane asked. “He was dressed a lot like Rasler.”

“No.” Ramza replied thoughtfully. “I’ve never seen that man before, but his outfit could have only come from the Underworld or the time before.”

“Why can’t we ever just get some answers?” Zidane asked, though it seemed directed at no one in particular.

“Mayhap Rasler has found some answers that will help to sort things out.” Ramza replied.

“How can we trust his word, if he’s turned against us?” Garnet added bitterly. “And what if those shackles are just another one of their tricks? I think we should get rid of them.”

Ramza ran his finger across the ancient markings and looked past the railing as the ship began to descend. “I suppose we will have to take a leap of faith.”

....

“I can’t believe we actually made it out!” The blond haired woman exclaimed as she gazed at the storm overhead. “But what are we supposed to do to stop a storm like that!?”

With a groan, Rasler came to a stop beside her. The pair was standing thigh deep in white powdery snow. They could see Esto Gaza only a couple of leagues ahead, but more importantly the massive storm overhead was now well over them. Dagger wondered vaguely if being this close to a storm with so much lightning was a good idea, but either way they didn’t have much of a choice.

She turned and looked at Rasler, who was still sweating profusely despite the cold. “Are you sure you’re okay? You almost collapsed on the way back to the orb, and you certainly don’t look any better.”

“I’m fine Garnet, just a little tired. If we’re fortunate we’ll have time to rest at the inn before the others arrive.” He answered.

She look at him skeptically as he stood almost drunkenly in place. As he began to walk forward again she resigned herself to just keeping a watchful eye on him until she was able to rest enough to use magic again. The wind whipped her now blond hair as she followed behind. She was very thankful they

didn't encounter any of those fish monsters that always jumped out of the ice at the last minute, not only spraying you with miserably wet snow, but attacking with even more viscous ice attacks. Not only could you never predict them or be ready, but she seriously doubted they would be able to fight them off as tired as they were. She tried to cover her face as best she could from the onslaught of snow powered by the storms winds. Yes, she was very thankful they hadn't encountered any monsters and if she squinted hard enough she could see an airship coming toward them, so maybe they would have at least an hour or two to rest.

"Thank the gods we're here." Rasler huffed tiredly, as they reached the stone steps of the town's inn. She nodded in agreement and then let out a small shriek as a handful of the cold snow fell down the neck of her vest. They wasted no more time in entering the doors and swiftly closing them tightly behind them. She miserably tried to knock some of the snow off of her as Rasler approached the innkeeper.

"Greetings!" the innkeeper welcomed. "I must say I am surprised to see visitors in this storm. How might I be of service?"

Rasler pulled out a small pile of gil and dropped it heavily on the counter. “Two rooms for the night, possibly longer. If anyone asks who is staying in the rooms, tell them we’re just a couple of locals. Will that be a problem?”

Dagger watched as the innkeeper eyed the gil greedily. “No more than a week?” he asked, his voice hopeful.

“No.” Rasler relied tiredly.

The innkeeper swept the gil behind the counter and handed him two keys. “Two of the best rooms sir, they are the last two at the end of the hall. Would u like baths and a meal prepared?”

He looked at Dagger and the hopeful expression on her face for a moment before turning back to the innkeeper. “Yes, thank you, but—”

“It will be most discreet sir. You have my word.” The innkeeper smiled.

Rasler took the keys and threw one to Dagger. She caught it clumsily and the pair walked down the hallway toward their rooms. “What if Zidane and the others come here? Won’t we need to meet them?”

“It can wait till morning. I won’t ask you to sleep, but I’m going to. At least try to relax; we may not get another chance.” With that, he went into his room and shut the door behind him, leaving Dagger alone in the hallway. Absently, she opened the door to her own room and tiredly flopped down on the single chair that inhabited the room. Looking around the room, she could tell it was a much nicer than the one she had stayed in the first time she had been to Esto Gaza.

The maids came in quietly and began to fill the bath with hot water in the adjoining room. Talking to them would probably have helped her feel better, but instead she just continued to sit quietly in the chair. She knew she was lucky, not only had Rasler’s plan to leave the underworld worked, but here she was in one of the nicest rooms she had ever been in; its quality and furnishings second only to how the castle had been.

After they had finished filling the bath the maids quietly informed her that if she needed anything else, all she had to do was let them know. She halfheartedly thanked them, and they locked the door on the way out. She felt as though she were in a daze as she stripped of her outfit and sunk into the near scalding hot depths of the scented water of the

tub. It felt deliciously relaxing, but she just couldn't bring herself to enjoy it the way she had expected. Her head swam with thoughts of her kingdom and how much the people had surely suffered again while she was helpless to fix it. As she closed her eyes and began to drift off even further, her mind fixated on the one thing she had hoped to avoid, Zidane.

She felt the weight of guilt heavily on her just as she had when she had first come to in the underworld after giving up to Damian. A stronger part of her knew she wasn't to blame, that the fiend that had played off as just some generous noble had been more manipulative and twisted than Kuja had been. In the end, she decided she just felt painfully lonely... Gods she wished Zidane were here. Please let him be ok..

...

"Lady Hilda!" A soldier yelled desperately as he pushed his way into the conference room. 'Lady Hilda! I have urgent news!' No time was wasted as she and Freya quickly turned toward the soldier. "What news do you have!?"

"I'm afraid the rumors about an army coming from the direction of Alexandria were true! Our

scouts can see the enemy on the horizon, they will be here by nightfall!”

Hilda’s face visibly paled at the news. “How many?”

“Well over a thousand Ma’am, though they are too far away to be certain.”

“Over a thousand!? We do not have even half that after the destruction caused by Kuja!” Hilda gasped.

“Surely you must be mistaken!” Freya protested, disbelievingly.

“I am certain ma’am, I wish I did not have to deliver such news! Is there nothing we can do?” The soldier replied.

“Has there been any sightings of enemy airships?” Steiner asked suddenly.

“Not that I am aware of Sir.” He answered.

“Then maybe we still have a chance! With the airship’s cannons we can attack them without the enemy being able to retaliate!” Steiner exclaimed.

Hilda bit her lower lip and stare at him thoughtfully. “If only my husband were well.... How soon can the airships be ready to attack?”

“Within the hour ma’am; the Regent had already given the orders to load the ammunition onto the ships.”

Hilda sighed with relief. If there was one thing Cid had always prided himself on, it was his readiness for even the worst of scenarios. “As soon as the ships are ready, have them depart!”

The soldier bowed, then hurried from the room.

“If what Ramza says is true, and I’m sure that it is, the army that marches toward us may not be human! Even with the help of the airships we cannot attack them head on!” Freya exclaimed.

“Then what would you suggest?” Hilda breathed with exasperation. “I.. I do not know what to do in times of war; I always relied on my husband for that.”

“We are outnumbered. The only thing that makes sense to me besides attacking with the airships, is to focus all of our forces into defending the walls, if we can stop them from breaking through the walls, maybe we can slowly whittle down their numbers!” Steiner suggested.

“I agree.” Freya added. “We need to move the people that live near the walls to the castle or at least

the center of the city, that way they will be protected if the enemy has siege weapons.”

“Alright.” Hilda nodded. ‘That’s what we will do. Maybe the others can find a way to stop them if we can just hold them off.’ She then turned to the remaining soldiers in the room. “You heard them! Move!”

The soldiers nodded, then turned and ran from the room.

“May the gods be with us..” Hilda breathed.

...

“I take back what I said about rain, this blizzard is far worse!” Ramza yelled over the wind as they neared the inn at Esto Gaza. The wind and snow were hammering against them mercilessly as they tried to keep their bearings on the black of night. No stars were out, so even if the snow had not been so severe, traveling from the ship by faint moonlight only would have been a challenge. As a result, He, Zidane and Garnet had gotten lost more than a couple of times. Blank, Marcus and the rest of the crew had elected to stay behind on the ship, and no one blamed them.

What had surprised Ramza the most, however, was that it was Garnet that usually ended up finding the right direction. Whereas even Zidane, whom he had heard did almost all of the leading during their last journey, had been as much at a loss as he was. Perhaps her Eidolons had helped her find the right path? Either way, as they now climbed the steps to the inn, he was glad that she had been with them.

They entered into the large warmly lit lobby of the inn and were greeted happily by the innkeeper. “Welcome! Perhaps you would like a room for the night to take shelter from this unusually powerful storm we’re having?”

Zidane shook the snow from his tail and approached the man. “Has there been anyone else come in that’s not from Esto Gaza in the last couple of days?” He asked.

“I’m afraid our only other two guests are locals who do not wish to be disturbed.” He answered apologetically.

Zidane looked back at Garnet and Ramza, the latter of which shrugged. “How much is a room for the night?”

“A room with three beds will be five hundred gil per night, will that be acceptable?”

“I wish it was cheaper, but we don’t really have any other options, so yea we’ll take it.” He replied, grudgingly digging the Gil from his pocket. After being told where the room was, he led them to their room and in only a few minutes both Ramza and Garnet were sleeping deeply. At least that’s what he had assumed.

He was laying in his own bed, lost in thought and unable to sleep. He had slept well the night he had found Garnet, but since then he found that he couldn’t fall asleep easily. Even when he did manage to sleep he would waken covered in sweat from a nightmare he could scarcely remember. He could faintly recall that in one of them he had been running down a hallway chasing a blond woman in a white dress.

This time, sleep would not be coming anytime soon. As he lay motionlessly staring at the ceiling, he saw Garnet sit up suddenly in her bed. He started to turn and try to comfort her, but even in the dim room she did not look to be upset. Thinking that was a little strange, he instead pretended to be asleep but still watched her from the corner of his eye. She

stared at him unmoving for a time, and he began to worry that she really was upset.

After a few more moments though, she broke her gaze and climbed out of bed. He couldn't tell what it was, but she grabbed something from under her mattress and quietly slipped out of the room.

Zidane waited until he was sure that he heard her small footsteps going down the hall before he too climbed out of bed and with all the stealth of his thieving adventures, he began to follow her. Who knows, maybe she just needed some fresh air? He wished he didn't feel the need to follow her, but here he was.

Stopping at the end of the hallway, he tried to listen as she talked to the innkeeper who was oddly still awake and attending the desk. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't make out what they were saying. The only thing he could tell was that the innkeeper had looked scared for a moment, but now was almost dazedly smiling and nodding in agreement. She handed him something wrapped in cloth, which he received eagerly. "Don't let me down." She commented a little more loudly, as she spun on her heel and began to walk back toward him.

“Shit.” He breathed as he turned and hurried back to their room, his mind racing with the possibilities of what he had witnessed. As he placed his hand on the door handle, a knock at the end of the hallway caught his attention. He turned, and standing at the end of the hall was a beautiful blond haired woman staring at him with wide eyes. He didn’t have time to say anything to her, so instead he shot her a grin and ducked inside of the room quickly climbing back into bed. Not a moment later Garnet returned and quietly slipped back into her own bed with no sign of whatever she had had before

Who was that woman? And why the hell was he thinking about her instead of Dagger? No, he mentally scolded himself. There was no way he was going to give up on her and start thinking about someone else even if she had been acting strangely. He only hoped that if one of those things they had encountered were somehow possessing her that the real Dagger was still in there somewhere.

The next morning..

Zidane and the others awoke to a sudden yell followed by crashing and clattering noises coming from the end of the hall. Despite his daze from having only fallen asleep a couple of hours

beforehand, Zidane didn't need any of the following cries of pain as further encouragement to jump out of his bed and charge out of the room. The simple fact was, the first surprised yell had sounded almost familiar.

As he broke out into the hallway, followed by a slightly groggy Ramza and Garnet, he saw a man lying on the ground in his own blood halfway out of the smashed doorway with his head cleft in two. He grimaced at the man but still hurried toward the room that the sounds had obviously come from and saw another man in a similar fashion as the first splayed out across the chair with a dagger sticking out of his back. Looking up in time, they managed to catch a glimpse of the same blond haired woman that he had seen the night before as she hurried out of the window.

He looked back at Ramza who was checking to see if the second man was dead and at Garnet that was still staring in disbelief at the blood splattered across the room. With only a passing thought at whether or not it was a good idea, he nodded at Ramza and dived out the window in pursuit of the woman.

17. Amethyst

The window had been a little higher up than he had expected, quite a bit actually, but fortunately a thick layer of snow cushioned his landing. After regaining his bearings, he noticed with dismay that there were no footprints leading away from the inn. He started to just wing it as he normally did and go the direction he would have fled if it were him, but instead noticed at a small trail of red droplets leading in the direction of the mine.

Following it quickly, he climbed back up to the stone walkway and with relief, realized that the snow was only a few inches deep there, having been blown to lower places and tight alcoves by the gusting winds. His gaze followed the droplets until it landed on two figures standing in the shadows of the overhang that protected the doors to the mine. One of them was undoubtedly a man, and the other one had to be the blond haired woman. He could see the faint glow of white magic on her hand that was healing the cut that would have had to have been pretty deep to have bled so much.

As he drew nearer, the man in the shadows drew his blade and walked toward him. It only took a moment for him to realize who the man was.

“Hello Tribal, I am glad you made it in one piece.” Rasler greeted, though with notable lack of warmth.

“You said if I came here I’d get answers. So, what are you scheming?!” He replied.

“Scheming? Is that what you think I’ve been doing? If you want answers why not start with serious questions?” Rasler countered. “Unless your anger has blinded you to reason? If it has, I’m more than willing to meet your steel with my own.”

“Alright.” He replied, calming down a little. “Just tell me this; what the hell did you do to Dagger?”

The question seemed to catch him off guard, but after a moment Rasler chuckled. “Figures. A raging storm overhead, and you’re more concerned about your woman. To answer your question, I’ve done nothing but try to help her. Anything you may think or be concerned with is not my doing. But, why do you ask? She travels with you now does she not?”

“I don’t know, ever since that necklace brought her back, she just seems different.” He replied

lamely.

“Well, I don’t know about her personality but aside from looking pissed, she looks fine to me. Why not ask her yourself?” Rasler nodded to Zidane’s right, where she and Ramza were coming up the steps toward them.

“Rasler! I am gladdened to see that you survived!” Ramza greeted enthusiastically. He tried to walk closer to him, but as he drew near Rasler pointed his sword at him and backed up a step. Ramza gave the man a look of confusion. “Why are you doing this? You know well that I would not betray you.” He offered, making no move to draw his own weapon.

“These are dark times Ramza, far different than what we faced before. How can I be certain you are not my enemy now?”

“What do you mean?” Ramza asked. “You know well that I cannot be possessed by them, have you forgotten the battle against my sister already? I tried to offer myself so that they would no longer reside in her, but they could not or would not do it. You and I both know that they would not have turned down that offer willingly. Even if they enjoyed

forcing me to kill my own sister. Have you truly become so blinded?”

Rasler let out a defeated grunt, and lowered his sword. “I remember. You were able to bring her back to life with the stone, only for the stones to kill her again.” It was only after he had lowered his weapon that Zidane and Ramza noticed how labored his breathing was. It was obvious to both of them that the man was in no condition for a fight.

“What happened to you?” Zidane asked, more softly than he had before.

Rasler studied Garnet cautiously for a moment, who was glaring at him angrily, and then turned his attention back to the blond thief. “After the battle in Treno, I awoke somewhere in the underworld.”

“The underworld!?” Ramza interjected. “Is it how we thought it would be?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, but far larger than we could have ever imagined. The heat was... near suffocating in places, sweltering in others. I ended up near what must have been a great castle at some point, thankfully it was mostly deserted.”

“Mostly?” Ramza inquired, eyebrow raised.

“In short, I got acquainted with a dragon, had a rather unfriendly run-in with the one who calls himself Damian, and managed to find a new companion; who has already saved my life more than I’d care to admit.” He then looked backed to the shadows, where the blond haired woman Zidane had seen earlier walked forward hesitantly.

Garnet was still the most beautiful woman Zidane had ever laid eyes on, but damned if it wasn’t hard to take his eyes off of her. Those curves, and the way that black suit fit her just tight enough to make his imagination take off running like a kid that just snagged a bag of gil, and there was something about those green eyes..

“Nice to meet you. May I ask your name?” Ramza asked courteously.

“Um.. My name is Amethyst. Nice to meet all of you.” She replied with a gentle smile. Rasler carefully shot her a quizzical look, but she only grinned slightly.

“So you’re from the underworld?” Zidane asked with a flirtatious smile. For a second he thought he saw mild annoyance cross her features, but he could have imagined it, because now she was smiling

politely. “Yes, though I’m the last from my town that’s still alive.”

“I see you use daggers like Zidane, you must be pretty fast.” Garnet commented in an attempt to be friendly, though her eyes spoke differently.

She locked eyes with Garnet, but some of the previous malice was no longer there. “Um.. I suppose I get by. Rasler has been trying to train me to get better.”

“I saw u were using white magic. I wonder if you’re as good as Dag? She’s a pro.” Zidane commented, eyeing Garnet with a grin.”

Amethyst shook her head and blushed slightly. “I know a little, but I definitely wouldn’t say I’m a pro.”

Rasler nodded in agreement. “Her magic helped me tremendously, so rest assured she will help our cause. More importantly, I believe she would sooner die than to help the ones controlling the underworld, especially after what they did to her people.”

“Well, since we’re all a team again, what’s with this storm?” Zidane asked.

Rasler let out an aggravated sigh before answering. “I believe this storm has something to do with the true gateway to the underworld. Ramza, last time we fought them one of the demons said that they would not only open the underworld, but that it would consume the world we knew. So, I don’t think they merely want to defeat us, they want to possess all that they can, kill the rest, and then create a new age where the fires of the underworld consume everything they do not endeavor to keep. I’m not entirely sure how this storm comes into play, but a storm this size could not maintain itself if it were not being fueled by an external force. And Amethyst believes that whatever it is must be in the Gulug Mines.”

“Yea.” Zidane replied thoughtfully. “It would have to be something very powerful to keep up this much energy. So if it is in there, it shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“Well what are we waiting for? Let’s go!” Garnet replied, pushing open the doors to the mine.

Amethyst gave Rasler a worried look, who simply shrugged. As she watched Zidane push out ahead of the person that should have been her, she

couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy as she remembered how often he had done that for her.

"Ramza?" Rasler started, not moving as the others went ahead.

"What's bothering you?" Ramza asked, his concern obvious.

"There is something I need to tell you, and I need you to do me a favor, no questions asked."

"I can promise that I will try."

...

With Zidane leading again, the way forward wasn't as difficult as Dagger had feared it would be, using the daggers was becoming easier with each enemy they encountered. She felt a small thrill from the looks of jealousy her previously mirror image shot her as she managed to capture Zidane's full attention on more than one occasion. Before long, she and Zidane were practically competing against each other as they fought the smaller enemies.

After a particularly harder fight against three red dragons, in which she had been more than a little tempted to summon Bahamut to aid them, Zidane approached her. Garnet had turned her back to see if

the others needed healing, and he flashed her a quick smile. “You know, you’re really something else. I always thought I was fast, but you definitely give me a run for my money.”

Dagger tried not to smile, but failed at hiding a grin. “Thanks, but I’d wager fighting isn’t the only thing you’d think I was good at.” She didn’t give him a chance to respond as she turned around quickly and strode forward, the ends of her hair brushing across his face as he stood. “I’m pretty damn sure of that.” He breathed quietly.

“She’s gotten bold hasn’t she?” Rasler commented as he passed. Garnet gave Zidane a curious look, but chose not to ask him anything.

As they neared the bottom of the mines, a faint red glow could be seen beneath them. Zidane gazed over the edge of the platform and saw the light was from a circular glyph that filled the flat surface below. The party descended the last ladder and was now standing at the edge of the glowing pattern, vibrations could be felt below their feet.

“Is this the gateway to the underworld?” Zidane asked, as he reached forward and touched the strange red glowing surface of the glyph. It didn’t

feel any different than anything else in the room, and it showed no signs of reacting to his touch.

“I believe so.” Ramza answered, looking around the space wearily. “But I find it hard to believe that something of such importance would be left unguarded. This has the makings of a trap.”

At his words, the others began to look around as well. Though Zidane noticed that Amethyst was eyeing Rasler carefully. The man was drenched in sweat, obviously Ramza’s words about him had been right, how long would Rasler be able to keep going?

Zidane walked into the center of the glyph, and with careful steps the others followed. Once they were all inside the Glyph, The glow changed from red to a bright blue that filled the room. It became so bright that they were forced to cover their eyes and wait until it died down, but only a few seconds later, the ground and everything around them began to shake with tremendous force. Zidane struggled to keep his balance, and he could hear some of the others falling to the ground. Suddenly, everything stopped.

When he opened his eyes again, they were all standing in a ghostly castle room. The only light

came from the returned red glow from the glyph, casting menacing shadows off of the suits of armor that lined the grey walls. The carpet that stretched before them was blood red and stained with many years of dust. Ancient cobwebs littered the walls and ceiling. It seemed obvious that no one had been in the room for a great many years. Centered at the end of the room on a raised platform was a golden throne, free of the dust that covered everything else. To their surprise, a figure sat in heavy black armor with a mirror sheen and a helmet that showed nothing of who or what was underneath.

“Where the hell are we?” Zidane asked.

“That is a good question.” Rasler replied with a groan. “Have you any guesses, Amethyst?”

The blond haired woman in question was currently staring at the armored figure on the throne and showed little interest in anything else. “I don’t like the looks of who or what that is.” She replied grimly.

“That makes two of us.” Ramza added, hand resting on his sword.

Zidane slowly walked toward the throne and the figure made no move to stop him or even

acknowledge his presence.

“Be careful.” Amethyst cautioned. The others stood in silence as he climbed the steps of the platform and reached out to touch the black armor. Just as his fingertips brushed the metal surface, ghostly blue eyes shot open causing Zidane to jump back and the others to draw their weapons.

After a moment, a cracked and broken laugh escaped from the depths of the helmet. It was low at first, but grew into louder far more menacing bursts. What the hell are you— “Zidane began to ask, but with a brightened glow of its eyes, the ghostly figure was gone, the throne empty and covered in dust as if noone had sat there in years.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Amethyst commented, looking at Rasler. “It feels just like when we fought—”

“Damian.” Rasler nodded, looking around the room. “Yes, but that was not him. Though I’d wager he’s here somewhere.”

“Well, if he’s here, we’ll kick his ass!” Zidane exclaimed.

“I beg to differ.” A voice echoed from the throne. The group turned sharply, and where the armored

figure had been, Damian now sat leisurely across the throne. He wore a malicious grin, and did not seem worried in the least that he was outnumbered.

“Damian!” Zidane hissed. “It’s time to pay for what you’ve done!”

Damian’s grin didn’t falter, but he swung his legs from the arm of the chair and stood up. “We meet at last Zidane. I’ve heard so much about you and what a ‘Hero’ you are. I may be bold, but I’m not so egotistical to think that that I could kill all of you on my own. So, since you’ve come with your friends, I’ve brought a few as well.”

Blue bands of light of began to form around them. From each of the blue lights stepped a demon that looked almost identical to the one that Zidane first encountered in the alley. In the dimly lit room they couldn’t be sure, but there had to be at least a dozen surrounding them by the time the lights faded.

“Shit.” Zidane breathed, remembering how strong the last one had been, and it was alone.

“You rely on numbers to defeat us only because you are a coward.” Rasler commented dryly.

“Wanting a rematch already? Even after you failed so miserably last time?” Damian laughed.

“Alright, I’ll make you a deal since you’re so eager to die.”

“And what deal is that?” Rasler spat.

“Fighting you on your own would be boring, so I will choose someone to fight in my stead.” He stretched out his hand beside him, and muttered words they could not understand. But as he finished the ghostly figure from before reappeared before them, its sword drawn and ready. Damian placed his hand on its shoulder. “If you can defeat HER without the help of your companions, we’ll call this one a draw and you will all live to fight another day, but if I win you will serve me, and you will give me the stone that you used against my loyal subject in Treno. Win or lose, I’ll let the others go for now as a gesture of my good faith.”

Amethyst glanced wearily at the demons that surrounded them, wondering how they would be able to defeat so many. As Rasler began to step forward she grabbed his arm, similarly to how he had previously grabbed hers but he yanked it free. “Don’t do it, you can’t fight that thing alone. But together, we CAN fight these demons and make it out of here!”

“No, do you not see it would be pointless?” He replied distantly.

“She’s right, don’t agree to anything that bastard says, together we stand a chance!” Zidane added, not taking his eyes from Damian.

“I accept your terms with one added condition.” Rasler replied, turning back to Damian and ignoring them. “But what is stopping you from having your demons kill them anyway once I’m finished?”

“I’m afraid you’ll just have to take my word for it.” He laughed. “And what is your condition? Though you’re hardly in a position to make demands.”

“You will let the others go now, you can transport the three of us and your Demons to another realm as you did to Garnet in Alexandria. There, I will fight whomever you wish.”

“It seems we have a deal.” Damian grinned. With a snap of his fingers, the demons were gone. He then formed another blue light beside of him, and motioned to Rasler. “Simply step into the light and it will be done.”

“Why are you doing this?” Amethyst asked, her face full of concern. “In turn, he stared back at her

and then moved his gaze to Garnet.” There’s something I should have told you Garnet.”

She looked at him with genuine confusion. “I hope one day that you can forgive me, but I learned months ago that Alexandria would be destroyed. With the stone I possessed, I could have stopped it from happening but I chose not to.” From the corner of his eye he could see the disbelief and anger in Amethyst’s eyes. “At the time I didn’t think that the lives of the people that were killed held much value compared to the rest of Gaia if I did not find a way reseal the underworld. Not only that, I was there when Damian arrived in the castle. I knew what he would try to do to you, but I thought it would be worth it if I could learn more of who and what we were up against.”

“That’s a lie! You said you had no knowledge of Damian!” Ramza protested.

“I lied to you Ramza, I knew you would try to stop it and without Alexandria’s destruction we might not have learned that they meant to control us instead of just killing us and that there are a select few pulling the strings. Esto Gaza may be a gateway, but I know now the tower that stands on

Alexandria's remnants is an important key to ending this even more so than the underworld itself.

Amethyst backed away from him, her hurt and anger obvious. "You.. You—"

"As I've said before, I've used the power of the stones far too much Amethyst and I have grown dark. I've tried to make the right choices, and do what I know to be honorable. But, the right things are becoming more difficult to see and I no longer even remember who I once was. I know enough to know that I should feel bad about the things I've done, not just to you Garnet, but everyone. Instead, I feel nothing except a cold emptiness. Traveling with Zidane and then you for even a short time has made me realize that I am no better than the monsters I try so hard to destroy, because when it comes down to it, I would let them die again without a second thought. But, I told you I intended to fix things, and this is the only way that I still know how. I have no desire to stick around and see how much darker my path turns."

With no further words, he stepped into the light. Within seconds, He, Damian and the armored figure were gone.

18. Showdown

“Damn.” Zidane remarked as the light faded.

“I don’t think he will be coming back.” Ramza replied sadly.

“Did you know that was going to happen?” Garnet eyed Ramza suspiciously.

“No, I only knew that if something did happen that he would do something rash.”

“Did he really mean everything he said?” Zidane asked, with a hint of sadness in his voice as well.

Ramza let out a heavy sigh and looked at Amethyst, who had not said anything but still looked upset. “Yes, but it wasn’t his fault. Rasler was a good man... for a long time he’s wanted nothing more than to end the fighting and go home. I don’t disagree with what he wanted to achieve, but if we start letting the end justify the means, we lose track of who we were. The stones also can change the person who uses them in ways that we may never understand, which is why I only use them when I have no other choice and even then..”

“So, you think he’s going to die?” Amethyst said quietly.

He did not reply at first, but walked to the other end of the room and opened the large double doors, revealing a marbled hallway. “Rasler knew he was dying, so he asked me for the Shackles and the stone that I carried. He said that if it came to it, he wanted to use them with the last of his soul to give the stone the power to destroy Damian. He may not have always made the right decisions, but he would never join the ones that took everything from him and fight against us.”

“Alright.” Zidane replied joining him at the doors. “So if we assume Rasler is able to kill Damian, what now?”

“I’ve never been in the underworld, so I’m not sure.” Ramza nodded toward the open hallway. “This castle has to mean something, I do not believe it exists only for the trap that Damian had set. He may be powerful, but I doubt any one man or demon is capable of materializing an entire castle.”

“So, If Damian didn’t create this castle, maybe it has another purpose. Let’s go see if we can find what that is and maybe we’ll find something that can help us.” Zidane nodded in agreement. Garnet left

the room and began down the dusty marble hallway. Zidane and Ramza began to follow after her, but stopped when they noticed that Amethyst had made no move to come with them. Instead, she was staring intently at the spot where Rasler had left.

“Are you okay?” Zidane asked softly.

Amethyst turned back toward them, and they could tell she was still upset but noted that she wasn’t crying. “Zidane..” She breathed.

He had always hated to see any woman upset, whether she was crying or just angry, but something about that look on her face cut into him deeply. “Yea?” Her face hardened a little, and that strange feeling he had had passed.

“Do you have the stone that Rasler dropped in Treno?” She asked, her emotions unreadable.

He looked at her curiously for a moment, trying to read her intentions. “Uh yea, why?”

“I need it.” She replied simply.

“What for?” he asked.

She looked down at her boots before returning her gaze to him. “If I don’t help him, he’ll die.”

“Rasler?”

She nodded. “No offense, but do you really want to risk your life for that guy? There’s no telling what we’re gonna run into down here, so we could really use your help.”

“...You went back for Kuja.” She replied softly.

Zidane sighed. How did she know about that? Damn he felt like a hypocrite. Instead of saying anything else, he reached into his pocket and handed her the stone.

“I’m certain the stone will be able to take you there, but I’m not sure if it will have the power to bring you back anytime soon, and if Damian gets his hands on the stone things will get much worse than they are now.” Ramza warned.”

“Are you going to try to stop me?” She asked defensively. “Don’t worry, I won’t let anyone have the stone.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I understand why you’re doing this, but would you allow one of us to go with you?”

She stared at Zidane for a moment, but shook her head indicating that she wanted to go alone.

“Finding a way to stop whoever else is behind this is more important, and I’d go with you... But I have to do this... I don’t want to lose any more of my friends, so please be careful.” She finished, and closed her eyes wishing for the stone to transport her. A blue light, similar to the one Damian stepped through formed several feet behind her. She walked toward it, but stopped one last time at its opening and turned back to them.

She still wasn’t crying, but to Zidane it was one of the saddest looks he’d ever seen, and he wouldn’t be forgetting it anytime soon. “Zidane.. If I don’t make it back I just wanted to say that I l—”

“Is everything alright?” Garnet asked, walking from behind him and slipping her hand into his. She gave the blond haired woman a look of confusion.

Amethyst shook her head sadly. “Thank you... For everything.” With another step, and like Rasler, was gone.

“I only hope her choice to use the stone doesn’t play into some darker hand.” Ramza commented with concern.

“You gave her the stone?! What if she—” Garnet exclaimed incredulously, but was surprised when

Zidane cut her off. “Yea, I don’t know why I trust her, but I just do. And she was right; things might be different now, but we don’t just give up on a friend no matter what’s goin on with them.”

Ramza nodded in agreement. “I would have done the same thing if Rasler had not made me promise that I would not try to stop him. As much as I would have liked to, I have never found breaking promises easy.”

“Well we can’t wait around here forever, so it looks like it’s just us again. Like Dag said, there’s gotta be something somewhere in this castle that can help us. Here’s hoping we find it before Damian comes back. Either way, let’s go!”

...

In an instant, the old time forgotten room was gone. In its place, Rasler was now standing in an elegantly lit room. The dusty suits of armor that had lined the wall now reflected the light with their impeccable polish. The carpet that he had assumed to be blood red, was in fact a vibrant ruby red, with delicate gold inlays throughout.

Standing before the throne was the armored figure, only now he could see why Damian had

referred to it as a woman. He could see parts of her smooth skin beneath the joints and crevices of the dark toned armor. He wondered if the knight was in fact Beatrix, but unless she had dyed her hair, the blond locks that protruded from the helmet told otherwise. Most of her face was hidden and protected, but the main thing that struck him was the darkness and rage he could see in her blue eyes.

Rasler turned to Damian who had returned to his leisurely recline on the throne and was grinning smugly. “Who is she?”

“Does it matter? You ought not to ask questions if you do not wish to know the answer. I trust this place suits your demand? I’d suggest drawing your weapon.”

Rasler grunted in annoyance and walked back to the center of the room before facing them again. He drew his blade and looked at the woman coldly. “Let us get this over with. I don’t want to kill you, but I will feel no remorse in doing so.”

She drew her weapon as well, a blade quite a bit larger than Rasler’s and most others he had seen for that matter. “I am glad. I too will feel nothing as I end your life.”

“Make your move, we’ll see who dies first.” And move she did. Rasler brought up his blade quickly, narrowly deflecting it inches from his throat. Her strength was reminiscent of Damian’s if only a fraction less jarring. She swung again, and this time he caught the blade completely with his own, sparks flying across the expensive rug. With steel pushing against steel, Rasler let out a growl and shoved her backward roughly. “You may be very strong, but even with that armor you don’t have the weight to back it up!”

She swung at him again, and he jumped backward to avoid it, but just as he was regaining his footing, “Thundara!”

He couldn’t hold back a scream of pain as lightning crashed into him from seemingly every direction. The spell died, and he barely had time to react as her blade slashed toward him. He dived to the side to avoid it, but still felt the sting of steel as the blade slashed a fairly deep cut into his upper leg. How had she been able to ready the spell and attack at the same time?! Not wanting to give her the chance to cast another spell, he pushed the pain from his mind and went on the offensive.

He swung and she caught his blade, but he did not give her the chance to deflect it as he again pushed her backward. She didn't lose her footing as he had hoped, but it did give him the opening he needed. "Those who dwell aloft have spoken. Let their words echo in your empty soul. Ruination is come! Devine ruination!" He pushed all the magical energy he could muster through his blade, and in an instant a swirling vortex of red light engulfed the armored woman. Many screams and distorted voiced filled the room with such intensity that her own screams could barely be heard above them. Rasler backed away from the light, panting from the excursion of the sword magic.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Damian watching with morbid fascination but making no move to intervene. When the light and noise faded, the woman was on her knees with her sword loose in her grip.

"Who are you!?" Rasler demanded through tired breaths. "You are beaten, answer me!" He had thought that perhaps it was Beatrix, but her fighting style seemed so familiar.

"Our fight is to the death, Is it not? I will kill you, or you will kill me. Do our names matter? My

choices have led me here, as have yours.” She answered as she got back to her feet and readied her sword again. “In truth, this fight is the saddest moment of my life, though are either of us really alive? Either way, I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

What did she mean? Rasler gritted his teeth as she came at him again. Her blade connected with his and he tried to push her back again, but instead she withdrew her blade and quickly swung again. He considered himself skilled in sword combat, but no matter how hard he tried, it seemed he could do little more than keep blocking her attacks. It was obvious that her speed was greater than his own, but what puzzled him was that sense of familiarity he just couldn’t shake.

After a while, he lost count of how many of her frenzied attacks he had blocked, and began to wonder how long it would be before he made a mistake or a misstep and it cost him his life. He had to end this quickly, but could he afford to use the power of the stone so early? He grimaced at the thought but knew he wouldn’t have a choice unless he intended to die for nothing, but as he caught her blade for what could have been the last time, he found that he was able to block it easily. In disbelief,

He glanced at his blade and noticed that it now held a faint glow. His blade had glowed with power in the past, but he was almost certain that the power came from somewhere else. Refusing to waste it, he used all the strength he could muster combined with the magic to push her back and send her sprawling across the floor.

Damian jumped up from the throne and walked forward angrily. “How did you get here!?”

Rasler looked behind himself, and standing at the doors was the last person he would have ever expected to come to his aid: Garnet, or Amethyst as she had come up with. Ignoring Damian and the fallen knight, he turned to her fully. “Why did you —”

“If I stood by and let you die, how would I be any different than you? I refuse to stand by and let something happen to another one of my friends.”

“Friend?” Damian laughed disbelievingly. “You would risk your life to help him? He would sooner see you dead than do the same for you.”

She looked at Rasler, then back to Damian nodding to herself. “If you want to fight him you’ll have to fight me too!”

“Touching, but our deal didn’t involve you. So, why would I let you interfere?” Damian asked threateningly.

Dagger held out the zodiac stone she had used. “If you win, I’ll give you the stone.”

“Two against one is not very fair fight, wouldn’t you agree?” Damian snickered. “So if you wish to join him, I will be stepping in as well.”

“I can handle this fight on my own, you cannot let him get that stone.” Rasler warned.

“Then we’ll fight both of you.” Dagger replied determinedly, ignoring him.

Damian chuckled lightly and looked to the female knight who seemed to be waiting for his orders. She looked like she was breathing heavily, but still more than willing to continue the fight. Her face might have told a different story if they had been able to see it. “You’ve got spunk, I’ll give you that.” Damian started with a grin. “Alright if you are so eager to die who am I to refuse you?”

“If there’s anyone that’s going to die, it’s you.” Rasler replied, pulling out the shackles.

Damian recoiled as his gaze landed on them, all of his previous smugness completely gone, as the symbols began to glow. “Where did you get those!? They were locked in the underworld! There’s no way you could have gotten them on your own!”

“That is easy, I gave them the shackles.” A voice called from the corner of the room, and for the first time they noticed a man leaning against the wall. Had he been there the entire time watching the scene unfold?

“You!” Damian screeched. “I should have known you would don the traitor’s cloak, Tarius!”

Tarius walked toward Damian, lowering his hood to reveal short brown hair and green eyes. He had a short beard the same color as his hair, and he wore a scar that ran from his lower cheek almost to the bridge of his nose. Unlike Damian, he showed no enjoyment or any other emotions on his features. “Traitor? Depends on your perspective. My Ideals have not changed.” He motioned with his head toward Rasler and Dagger. “I’m not on their side, I just happen to see things a bit differently than the old man who turns a blind eye to your failures. He thinks you will be king, but I see the truth; you are nothing more than a spoiled brat!”

“When Father finds out that you have betrayed him, he and the others will destroy you!” Damian spat vehemently.

“Find out?” Tarius asked incredulously, walking closer. “Do you truly believe that you are going to make it out of this room alive?”

Damian looked worriedly at the female knight for a moment that now stood by his side in a defensive stance. “You are nothing compared to me! I will end you all!” He waved his arm, and beams of light appeared around the room. A demon identical to the ones before stepped forth from each, staring at Tarius and the others waiting for a command. With their arrival, Tarius did laugh.

“What are you laughing at!? My demons will rip you to shreds!” Damian roared.

Rasler and Dagger looked around the room nervously, had this man lost his mind? Surely he could not be strong enough to defeat all of them? Or perhaps he thought they could defeat them?

“You have always relied on your ‘pets’ far too much Damian, what will you do when all of them turn on you?” Tarius commented darkly.

Damian's eyes widened at his statement, and he looked uncertainly at the demons. "Kill them! Kill them all!" he barked, but to his dismay the demons made no move to acknowledge his command. He backed up hurriedly, not taking his eyes from Tarius. To Rasler the man he had been sure would kill him, now looked like a rat in a cage.

"I'm afraid your command has gone unheard." Tarius commented casually. "Perhaps they would prefer my commands? Be gone." Within a few seconds, the demons were gone.

If looks could kill, Damian would have more than done so. However, it was the armored woman who spoke. "You would kill your own brother?"

"I would sooner turn my blade on myself before I would call him my brother! My father's blood may flow through his veins, but that is all! All of the traits that could have made him worthy of being my brother were never founded! He soils our name and flaunts his meagre powers when even those should have been stripped away from him. Had he any honor at all, he would stand before me now and die with conviction! Now, step aside or be cut down with him!"

“I don’t need my demons to kill you! Father knows I have power far greater than yours!” Damian yelled defiantly. “I’ll show you what I am capable of! Unholy Darkness!”

Dagger had never seen another spell like it, the ground seemed to open up into a pit of black nothingness. At first only the ground turned black but after only a few seconds a column of darkness shot up, completely consuming Tarius. She and Rasler backed up to the wall as the waves of dark energy radiated from it. They could hear what must have been a thousand demented voices crying out and screaming in anguish from the nothingness Damian had created.

“I don’t see this ending in our favor Garnet, use the stone I carry and flee while you can!” Rasler commanded.

“If we can’t stop him, what good would it do?” She yelled over the noise.

“Damn you, Garnet!”

After a few more agonizing moments the spell died down and the darkness began to fade. To everyone’s amazement, Tarius still stood. Not only that, but he seemed completely unscathed.

“W-What?!” Damian exclaimed as he saw Tarius still standing. “How are you still standing?”

Tarius laughed coldly. “Unlike you I don’t just hide in the darkness, I AM the darkness! Allow me to show you the power you could never attain!” He outstretched his arm toward Damian with an open palm, and began chanting in a language they could not understand. The last line however, was painfully clear. “Fires of hell come forth with your infernal torment, Hell’s Banishment!”

“Nooo!” Damian screamed as large fiery chains shot from the ground binding his legs.

“I’ve never thought myself a coward, but now would be a good time to distance ourselves!” Rasler yelled, yanking the doors open.

This time Dagger didn’t argue with him as she hurried out into the hallway. They heard Damian scream in agony and turned to see what was happening just as a massive wave of heat crashed into them. Their eyes watered from the immense heat, but from what they could tell, there was no way Damian would have been able to survive the spell. It was unlike any fire they had seen, it was so bright and suffocatingly hot that there was no more orange or red to the flames, they were almost entirely white,

like a burning star in the night sky. The chains that had held him were now a pool of molten metal and they could no longer hear anything but the roar of the incredible flames.

Rasler had intended to run, but found that both he and Dagger were unable to look away, even as the fires died, leaving no evidence that anything had ever been there except for a small pile of ashes on the floor. Their gaze finally broke from where the spell had been, and landed on Tarius, who was running a gloved hand through his hair. They noticed that the armored woman was also nowhere in sight.

They both quickly grabbed their weapons again as Tarius turned toward them grinning. “I suppose I should thank you! Had you not brought those shackles that might have went differently. I would have carried them myself, but for some reason they do not work with me. So, unless you’re itching for a fight, what do you say I return you to your friends, and you pretend we never met?”

Dagger looked at Rasler, who said nothing, but seemed to share the same sentiments about not wanting to fight the man. She released her weapons, and nodded gently.

“Good.” Tarius answered, and to their amazement pulled out a pink stone. “Do not think us friends, when next we meet I may not hesitate to kill you.” He spoke in that dark language again, and in an instant they were back in the cobweb covered room.

“How are we supposed to fight someone with spells that powerful, if I can’t even summon?” Dagger asked, still shaken from what they had witnessed.

“There are many secrets in the underworld, perhaps we can find some new powers to aid us in our fight. For now let us not worry about Tarius, I believe we have other things we need to deal with.”

“Like that thing pretending to be me.” Dagger replied quickly.

Rasler nodded, and she turned and began to leave the room. “Why did you come back for me when you could have stayed by Zidane’s side?”

She stopped and turned toward him, he looked genuinely confused. “I told you already.”

“Why would you consider me a friend? I’ve done nothing worthy of being called a friend.”

She looked at the ground bashfully. “You brought Zidane back to me.. I don’t think you would have done that if you didn’t care. Ramza said that the stones have changed you, but I don’t think you would have kept trying to help me if a part of you wasn’t a good person.”

“Let’s go deal with your double, I think it’s time we find out what she’s up to, and put an end to it.” Rasler replied, not looking at her as he walked past her.

19. End of Chapter 1

“I think we should look somewhere else.” Garnet offered as Ramza thumbed through yet another book in the freshly destroyed library. He had suggested that a doorway might be hidden behind one of the bookcases, so they had torn down almost every book in the shelves. “Maybe it would be better if we split up?”

Zidane watched Ramza sigh as he carefully set down the book he had been looking at. Despite the fact that the man had seemed to be hurrying earlier, Zidane had a feeling he was doing everything he could do to stall for time. “No, we need to stick together.” Ramza replied. “Maybe the next room has the answers we’re looking for.”

“If something is in here trying to kill us, do we really need to be wasting our time searching each room? Treasures and weapons are kept in a treasury or an armory, not just a random room!” She countered, growing agitated.

Ramza looked at her intently, then at Zidane. “I strongly disagree, but alright... if that’s how you feel, lead the way Garnet.”

Zidane had never claimed to be the smartest person in a room, but ever since Ramza had had a conversation alone with Rasler, he could tell the man had been acting differently. What exactly had Rasler told him? It probably didn't matter, he had a few guesses as to who or what it was about. He could see the way he now watched Garnet out of the corner of his eye, and chose his words to her with reserved caution.

He had marveled at how Dagger had made it out of the castle in one piece, but even as he had held her in his arms, his mind had screamed that something was wrong. Against reason, he had forced himself to believe that the necklace had worked and HIS dagger was safe. But that wasn't true was it? Whoever she was now wasn't the same magnanimous woman she had been before. He could admit to himself that it had taken him a lot longer to fully figure it out than it should have, but once he had accepted that she was no longer the same person, it became painfully obvious that the woman he had loved was gone. And judging by Ramza's reactions, he knew it too.

He no longer blamed Rasler for what had happened to her, the man had obviously made some bad choices but hadn't he as well? If he had told

Dagger from the start what had happened to him that night and what Rasler had said, she could have prepared herself. Instead, he had all but pretended like nothing had happened. He would never forgive himself for that. He had other suspicions, even a hope, but for now, it was time to keep moving forward. Now, he needed to figure out what this new woman, or fiend as it was far more likely, was planning. Whatever it was, he had a feeling it was about to happen soon.

He followed behind Garnet and Ramza as she now led the way to the treasury. He didn't believe that she was guessing at its location as she pretended. Whoever she was, she had more than likely been here before. He quietly pulled the dagger from his belt, holding it ready in the dim hallway. Regardless of what was waiting for them in that treasury, he would do what he had to do to set things right. He only hoped that Ramza would not turn on him.

...

"Have you any idea which direction they might have gone?" Rasler asked tiredly as he and Dagger came to another junction in the massive labyrinth of hallways. "Well, unless Ramza had them go

somewhere else, they're probably looking for the treasury. That's where anything valuable would most likely be if it's anything like Alexandria." She offered.

"Not if this castle is very old, it was common knowledge in our time that castles held secret chambers to house their treasures instead of heavily guarded ones. That being said, I don't think Ramza would have told them otherwise."

Dagger gave him a look of curiosity, so he explained. "I told him who you were."

Her look of curiosity changed to one of mild alarm, but before she had time to say anything Rasler continued. "Ramza is more careful than I, he will not let what I have told him be known, if anything, he will do whatever he can to stall them or try to stop her from getting whatever is here."

"Then we need to hurry."

Rasler nodded at her solemnly. "I'll follow your lead, whatever you think is best we'll do. My own judgement cannot be trusted."

"Why do you say that?" She asked, her face betraying her concern.

“You need to understand Garnet, the things that Damian said about me were true. I once believed I was a good person, but that man is gone. I cannot win against the darkness in me that only grows stronger. I fear that if my end does not come soon, there will come a day when you will have to kill me Garnet, before I kill you. I only ask that you make my death quick, if you can.” He finished solemnly.

She nodded, but did not acknowledge his request. “Can I ask you something?”

Her question and its suddenness caught him off guard but he didn’t let it show. “Shoot.”

She pulled the Zodiac stone from her pocket and looked down at it thoughtfully. “Could this stone take us to the treasury before the others make it there?”

He studied her with hesitation, but answered honestly. “Yes, unless they are already there. It will take you wherever you wish to go, even give you more strength to fight your double if that is what is desired, but you must understand. Each time you use that stone it comes at a cost, and each time it becomes even more tempting to use it again. After all, what’s one year of your life compared to getting you out of a life threatening situation? The cost may

be even smaller than that at first, but each time that cost will become greater and you'll be doubly more willing to pay it. So yes, but you must decide if it's worth it."

She nodded in understanding. "But if the stones can do almost anything, couldn't we just wish for the stones to simply seal the underworld away again and fix everything?"

Rasler shook his head expectantly. "That was my first thought as well, but either they do not possess enough power on their own, or the stones simply don't desire to do it. Either way it's useless to even try without all of them."

"And if we found all of them?"

"Reality itself is your clay to shape as you see fit." He answered.

She looked back at the stone with a renewed sense of wonder.

"So what is your decision? The creature that has taken your form will most likely know exactly which direction to go and we have made three wrong turns already. That being said, it's still possible that it has no plans to kill them yet."

“We’ll use the stone.” She replied surely. “I won’t let anything happen to Zidane.”

He saw the determination in her eyes, and simply nodded.

...

Just as Zidane had thought, it hadn’t taken Garnet long at all to find the Door to the treasury. On more than one occasion along the way, Ramza had shot him a warning glance but had kept silent. Even more foreboding than the fact that she seemed to know exactly where it was, was that when they arrived the large metal doors were standing open as if inviting them inside.

Garnet was the first to enter the treasury, walking in confident strides. With a heavy sigh, Ramza came to a stop and drew his blade, turning to Zidane. “There is something I must tell you—”

“I know.” Zidane cut him off, not taking his eyes from Garnet.

Ramza nodded in understanding. “I’m sorry. But she’s not the woman you knew, if we can kill her, I am certain the woman you knew is still alive.”

“I’ll do what I have to.” He replied, pushing past him. There were stacks of gil along the left wall, and a few ornate pieces of armor along with various weapons lining the right. At the center of the room stood a pedestal with a sphere shaped recess at its center. Lightning bolt-like lines ran from the pedestal covering the floor and running up the walls.

Garnet rushed to the pedestal and screamed in anger. “Where is it!?” She turned back toward Zidane and Ramza glaring accusingly, only to notice they had drawn their weapons and now stood a safe distance away from her. She did not look surprised, but instead grew angrier. “How did you fools manage to take the orb before I did!?”

“You mean this one?” A voice commented from behind her. She turned around sharply, and locked eyes with Rasler. He was standing with sword drawn and a dark grin of satisfaction across his face; beside him stood Amethyst holding the orb in her left hand and a dagger in her right. “So, you’re the ones that figured it out. I knew you would be trouble when I first laid eyes on you!”

Amethyst stepped forward with anger burning in her eyes. “We’ll make you pay for everything

you've done! I won't let you hurt anyone else! Even If I have to kill you myself!"

To their surprise, Garnet started to laugh and Ramza grimaced as her voice began to distort in a way that had become all too familiar to him. "Do you truly believe that I had not planned for this?"

"What in the hell do you mean!?" Zidane yelled.

"I knew this moment would come from the start, I'm only surprised it took you fools this long to figure it out! Even then, you never realized it was all a distraction."

"A distraction from what?" Ramza asked cautiously.

"While you were all trying so desperately to find Damian and to stop me, the others have already found the other ten zodiac stones. The two you carry are the only ones that are left."

"Well, I'm afraid these stones are just out of your reach." Rasler replied.

"You still don't see it do you?" Garnet grinned evilly. "Again, you've done exactly what I wanted you to do."

“Even if you did have something waiting for us down here do you really think you can beat all of us?” Amethyst asked, walking closer holding her dagger in front of her.

“This room wasn’t the trap, did you really believe we would leave a gateway to anywhere useful unguarded? No, you all walked into our trap as soon as you entered this castle! You think I know my way around this castle because I’ve been here? I know it because it’s mine! I crafted it with my own hands! As for this room... your precious stones were mine as soon as you touched my orb!”

Amethyst dropped the orb in surprise and reached for the stone Zidane had given her, only to realize that she wasn’t bluffing. The stone was gone. Rasler didn’t bother to check for the one he had carried, knowing it would be gone as well.

“I knew you would use the stones to try to stop me! Why do you think I let you watch as I killed the Regent? Everything you have done and every move you have made, we have been two steps ahead of you! Mortals will never be able to stand toe to toe with gods! Now that we have all of the stones, we will reshape the world as WE see fit! Not that any of you will live to see it!”

It was then her eyes began to glow orange and she started chanting something that they couldn't understand. Within seconds, the walls of the castle began to rumble violently and deep ancient growls echoed through the hallway. They turned their attention back to Garnet as she abruptly stopped and her arms dropped lifelessly to her sides. "Have fun dying." She threw her head back and laughed.

Zidane and the others gasped as her body began to crack and break apart like dried clay, leaving nothing but a pile of ash where she stood. They were shook from their trance however, as the rumble grew stronger and the growls nearer.

"I don't think there's gonna be an easy way out of here!" Zidane commented.

"Then let's not stand here and die quietly!" Ramza yelled as the rumbling grew even louder and a faint outline of familiar scorpion-like creatures began to come into view.

Dagger's eyes widened as she remembered where she had last seen the creatures; the nightmares from that chase still haunted her miserably. She turned to Zidane and she could have sworn she meant to tell him something important, but her thoughts were cut short as he suddenly kissed her roughly.

“Wha?” She staggered back dreamily, momentarily forgetting about the danger rushing toward them. She looked at him slightly confused knowing that she was still wearing the bracelet.

“That’s not a goodbye kiss, that’s a promise we’re gonna make it out of here Dag, and I wont let anything hurt you again.”

“How did you..?” She began but he just flashed her a grin and turned back to the others.

“They come!” Ramza shouted. The monsters tore quickly down the hallway on not only the floor, but the ceiling and walls as well. After only a matter of seconds they burst through the doorway, and the first wave of them charged at the group.

Zidane quickly swiped at the first one with his dagger before stabbing it to the hilt into the head of the second one. From the corner of his eye he could see Ramza and Dagger fighting two others, their blades glowing with her new abilities that he still found impressive. He yanked his dagger free and swiftly dodged the poisonous stingers that lunged for his head. He brought his weapon down heavily, chopping off two of the legs of the nearest one.

It wasn't that they were incredibly difficult, in fact they would hardly be a challenge on their own. But, the sheer number of them was quickly becoming overwhelming. He managed to take down four more before he felt a burning stab in his right leg. Through the pain, he managed to knock the scorpion off of him, but he could still feel the burn of the venom that seemed much stronger than he had experienced before.

With effort, and care not to make the same mistake again, he staggered back a few steps and to his relief felt a cooling sensation instead of the pain. Deciding to risk it, he looked behind him long enough to see Dagger, no longer blond, shoot him a knowing smile.

A few moments later, the three of them were pressed back to back, fighting them off with everything they had left. It struck him then that Rasler was not among them, had he not been standing beside them a moment ago? A part of him couldn't help but worry that he had left them to die, but after risking a glance to his left, he felt his stomach drop.

Rasler stood among the fiends untouched, not because they avoided him, but because they simply

passed through him. He was almost completely transparent, as Ramuh had been when he made Dagger solve the riddle at Pinnacle Rocks. Rasler didn't look surprised, only defeated as he stared at his ghostly hands.

Zidane doubted they would be able to keep up their defense much longer as he could hear Dagger and Ramza struggling as well. How would he be able to keep the promise he had just made? He glanced toward Rasler again, and saw that he was even more transparent than before, but was walking toward him as if the fiends were not there.

Rasler stopped directly in front of him and there was a brief respite from the constant attacks, as the fiends seemed unsure of what was happening. He extended his hand to Zidane. "Take my hand Tribal, trust me one last time."

He looked at Rasler's hand for only a moment before grabbing it with his own. In an instant, he was no longer standing in the dark treasury surrounded by fiends. He stood atop a white castle surrounded by black nothingness. What surprised him more, however, was that Rasler was no longer the man he had come to know. He had released Zidane's hand, but he was sure it was still him.

Rasler now looked at least a few years younger, with his hair and beard neatly trimmed. No longer did his face show any traces of the weariness or darkness he had come to expect from the man. Instead, he looked almost at peace. When he had taken his hand, there seemed to be no life or will left in the man, but now his eyes burned with an intensity that surprised him.

“I knew my life was almost at its end, I had just hoped to accomplish more in the time I had left.” He commented sadly.

“Where are we?” Zidane asked looking around. “And where is-!”

“The others are exactly where they were when you grabbed my hand, as are you. Don’t worry about them for now, little if any time will pass while you are here.” Rasler interrupted calmly and walked to the edge of the marbled rail, looking into the darkness. “As for this place, it is just a creation of my memory. A place that was once my home.”

He started to ask Rasler why there were there, but instead opted to stay silent. “Like me, this place should have been forgotten a long time ago, but then so should I.” He then turned back to Zidane. “I did

not bring you here to reminisce. I brought you here to ask something of you.”

“What’s that?”

“A few weeks before I were sealed away, I learned what it was that kept me alive... Part of it was my wife, her soul refused to let me die, but it was also because of the sword I carry.” He unsheathed his battle worn blade and held it out lying across both hands.

“No offense, but it doesn’t look that special to me, and what does it have to do with what you wanted from me?” Zidane replied skeptically.

“It doesn’t, does it? Sadly the blade has a tendency to mirror its owner. I have reached my end, Zidane. I cannot fight anymore... at least not on my own, and the blade reflects it. It is your spiritual energy that is allowing me to do this, without it I would have already faded entirely. This sword can be the weakest weapon you have ever used, or far and above any other that has ever been forged. It is called the Lightbringer and if your soul is pure like I believe that it is, it will shine with power and unleash your full potential!”

He returned his gaze to the blade with renewed fascination. "If you choose to use it, I must warn you that like all things, it comes at a price... for both of us."

Zidane swallowed, suddenly tense with dread. "What price is that?"

"The blade is alive with its own spirit energy and is bound to me even in death. For you to harness its power you must break that bind. The only way to do that is to take the blade and stab me through the heart. In so doing, what's left of my soul will be cast into the darkness and you will be forced to carry the sword's burden."

"Are you insane!? How can you expect me to just kill you?" Zidane exclaimed in disbelief. The castle around them began to slowly fall away.

"The choice is yours, Tribal. Neither of us have much time. I will fade away anyway, and you cannot destroy all of the fiends that are attacking you on your own even if you manage to trance. So make your decision now, Zidane. Will you die with me and let the world you knew and those you care about be destroyed, or will you take up my blade, do what must be done, and right the wrongs that I was unable

to? Will you take a stand and be the king that Garnet needs you to be?”

With a shaking hand, Zidane reached for the sword.

...

Even with the new abilities that Rasler had helped her to learn, her arms burned fiercely and it would only be a matter of time before one of the venomous stingers found their mark.

That wasn't what worried her the most however, moments ago Zidane had been engulfed in ghostly blue light, and it had yet to fade. As much as she wanted to make sure he was okay, the fiends now completely covered the walls and Ceiling. Despite Zidane's promise, she couldn't help but feel that they wouldn't get the chance to do any of the things she had hoped that might one day happen.

Thinking back to all the things that had happened recently, she was thankful that she would at least have the chance to spend her last moments beside the man she loved and someone that could have become a true friend.

As one of the fiends knocked the blade from her tired hand, she expected that final blow to come

quickly, but the light that had engulfed Zidane suddenly began to radiate around the room, driving back the horde of fiends. No longer was the light a ghostly blue, instead it became almost a golden white that burned with an intensity she had never thought possible. Dagger and Ramza shielded their eyes as the light continued to intensify. They could hear the howls of agony from the fiends that had been unable to make it out of the room in time.

As the light began to finally fade, a quietness had returned to the room. Dagger uncovered her eyes and her gaze landed on Zidane. When it did, she couldn't help but gasp. It wasn't just that he was even more toned than he had been before and that he was now carrying a blade that held a faint luminescent glow; it was what he was now lacking. Zidane's tail was gone.

20. The Lightbringer

I've lived my life the only way that I knew how... I've made many mistakes, more than I would care to admit. I have often strayed far from the path of that which is right or just. As I stand now before my Judgement and have been made accountable for all that I have done and set into motion, did I truly made any positive difference at all?...

...

Zidane looked down at the sword he now held. The once dilapidated blade, now glistened with an inner light and an edge smooth as diamond. Ancient runes almost forgotten now boldly lined the length of the blade, running all the way to the pommel. More than the light, he felt vibrations from the blade that spoke of life burning within.

He felt different.. It wasn't just the sword. It was as if the room had taken on a new level of clarity and no longer seemed so dark. For a moment, he couldn't remember where he was. He began to step forward, only to realize that his balance had become much different. It was as if... he jerked his head back trying to see his tail, but it was gone. Gone!

Startled, he looked up and met Dagger's worried gaze.

"Are you okay?.." She asked quietly.

"I feel..." Zidane trailed off, and dropped his gaze to his empty hand. He opened and closed his hand experimentally a few times. In a way, he felt almost brand new and alive in a way that he wasn't sure he had ever felt. "Stronger, but also different. I can't really explain it.."

He raised his gaze back to her and suddenly remembered that aside from that one glance, and the hurried kiss, that this was the first time he had really *seen her* since before everything had started. All at once, it seemed like every emotion he had felt since he thought he had first lost her came rushing back to him.

"Dag.." He breathed. Judging by the look in her eyes, it was pretty obvious he wasn't the only one. He opened his arms and before he had the chance to give her a grin, he was locked in her tight desperate embrace.

As she sobbed into his vest, he didn't even bother trying to stop the tears that fell from his own eyes. "As long as I'm alive, I promise I won't ever leave

your side again Dag.” He choked and tightened his arms around her. After a few moments, her sobs slowed and he found himself petting her hair as he had before.

“When did you know?” she asked quietly, not moving.

“I think.. a part of me always knew that wasn’t you. But I just... I guess I couldn’t accept that that meant you might already be...” He felt her grip on him tighten, and wondered what she was feeling. “But when I saw you at the hotel, even though you looked completely different, I couldn’t stop thinking about it and I realized that there had ever only been one person that made me feel that way... Then, when Rasler introduced you to everyone and I saw that look in your eyes... even though it seemed crazy, somehow I just knew.”

She broke from his embrace and looked up at him with a bright smile. “I love you, Zidane.”

Zidane returned her smile and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “I love you too, Dag.” He lowered his gaze and eyed her suggestively. “And I gotta say, the new look suits you.”

Dagger's face lit up with her blush, but she returned the gesture with a smirk. "You definitely don't look bad either." After a second thought, her expression became a little apologetic. "I will miss your tail though. Does it hurt that it's gone?"

"Well I—" Zidane began, but was cut short.

"I hate to cut your reunion short, but we need to get out of here!" Ramza huffed tiredly, as he hurried back into the room. Neither of them had even noticed that the man had left. Zidane turned back to Dagger, and she smiled. "Let's go!"

He began to lead them from the room, but as he neared the door, the blade began to vibrate almost violently. His vision swam, and he felt lightheaded as though he were blacking out. He shut his eyes and tried to steady himself, and to his relief, after a few moments it did pass.

When he opened his eyes, the room and all of his surroundings had become grey. He whipped his head around to glance at Dagger, but she and Ramza were gone.

"Dag?" He called, suddenly feeling almost overwhelmingly desperate. The only thing he could hear at first was the beating on his own heart, but

after a moment the silence gave way to footsteps coming down the hall toward him. Gripping the new sword tightly, he prepared for the worst.

“Sir, I’m afraid this is something you MUST take seriously. You are to be king soon and this matter is something that must ensured!” A man pleaded as the doors burst open. A young man, obviously royalty, with short silver hair walked confidently into the room.

Zidanes grip loosened as he realized that the man paid him no heed, as if he had not seen him at all.

“All the matters right now is the wedding, once that is done, the peace between our two nations will be guaranteed. After that, there will be no need for weapons of war.” He commented.

“Your highness, if I may, can you truly be so ignorant?” The other man replied. He was much older and Zidane guessed that he must be some kind of scholar or advisor. He had a long grey neatly combed beard, and was very scrawny. The old man adjusted the glasses on the bridge of his nose as his younger counterpart turned around to face him.

Zidane figured he wouldn’t like being called ignorant, but instead he didn’t seem fazed at all and

instead wore a smile that seemed almost familiar.

“How many times have I told you to call me Rasler?” He asked.

Zidane couldn't help but take a few steps back in surprise.

“And I am not ignorant. I know it will not mean peace between all nations, and the empire may yet attack us, but together we will be able to take a stand against them! They would not risk a full scale war just for our small territories!”

“Rasler..” the old man began. “I am afraid our territory is not what they are after.”

This time, Rasler did seem surprised. “What do you mean?”

“I believe they are after the royal heirloom, its value is not just monetary. If they were to get their hands on it, it would be a tragedy indeed.”

“You speak of the Midlight shard.” Rasler confirmed.

“Yes, but not only that. There are things that only a select few of Nabradia have ever known. Given the kingdoms size, have you not thought it strange that we have yet to fall?”

Rasler looked puzzled. "I had always thought it was because of the paling and our use of magic."

"No, they fear what we possess."

"What do we possess that could hold such influence? And if only a select few have known, why tell me now?" he asked cautiously.

The old mans gaze did not falter, not did he seem surprised by his questions. "We have been observing you, and we believe that you can be trusted to make the right decisions. As for who we are, we are a secret order created by the great king and have held to our duties for generations without falter. As for what we possess, would you believe that it lies in this very room...?"

As the old man began to trail off, Zidane watched as the room began to turn back to color. Rasler and the man began to fade away, and as they did, he realized that whatever he had been talking about must still be in the room.

Zidane jerked back into awareness as Dagger grabbed his shoulder. Dazedly, he turned back toward her. "Huh"?

"Are you ok?" She asked, her face full of worry.

“You saw something did you not?” Ramza added knowingly.

Giving Dagger a reassuring smile, he then turned to Ramza. “How did u know?”

“Rasler used to see things too.” He replied hurriedly. We haven’t much time. “What did you see?”

“There was this old guy, and he... I think there’s something important in this room.” He finished, sounding unsure.

“Is it the orb we found earlier? I thought it was just something designed to steal the stones. Maybe it does other things we don’t know about?” Dagger offered hopefully.

“I have no idea, but it’s worth a try.” Zidane shrugged. He took a step forward and was sent reeling as another vision hit him. Moving quickly, Dagger grabbed him under the arm and supported him before he hit the floor.

Does this orb truly hold such value that they would shed the blood of countless innocents to claim it!? “Rasler asked, gazing into the familiar orb that he now held.

“Perhaps that is what they believe, though in truth, the orb holds very little power of its own. That being said, if it were combined with an external magical energy who knows what it is capable of.” The old man shrugged, “Either way, That orb is not the true prize. The true prize is worth more than all of the Gil this world has to offer. It has been protected by us for over a millennia.”

Rasler looked at the man with curious wonder. “What is it? What could possible hold such power?”

“Have you heard of the creatures known as Espers? I believe something is corrupting them, twisting their energies into something more... I believe that it will only be a matter of time before something happens that will shake the very foundations of our reality.”

“And what does that have to do with what we possess?” Rasler asked, growing impatient.

“What we have is an object that may very well save us, even in the event of a cataclysm. I don’t know exactly what it is or how it works, but legends refer to it as a piece of the Gods. Just having it in our possession has allowed Nabradia to stand tall through all of these years of turmoil.”

Rasler said nothing, but continued his expectant gaze. The old man pointed to the wall at the back of the chamber. "The secret lies in that very wall." Rasler walked over to it, and ran his hand along its cracks. "Does it open?" He asked, his voice betraying excitement.

"Yes, but only with the key I'm afraid."

Rasler turned again to the old man, not needing to ask the question that had become obvious. The old man let out a troubled sigh. "It can only be opened by inserting a particular sword, referred to as" The Lightbringer ". I am sorry to say, however, that I do not know its current location. The reason I tell you all of this, is not so that you can use it, but so that together, we may continue to protect it. Will you join us and help us to ensure it is not discovered?

Rasler shook his head in both amazement and disbelief. "I'm not sure I believe all of it, but you have always believed in me, and I would be a fool to not help you in any way that I..."

The vision began to fade again, much faster this time, and he didn't feel nearly as disoriented as before. When his vision cleared, Dagger was gazing worriedly at him again. "Zidane?"

“I know what I have to do.” He replied hurriedly as he broke from Dagger’s hold and steadied his legs. It took him a moment, but Ramza’s increasingly hurried manner was enough to spur him to the wall he had seen. As he looked closely, he could see that there was a narrow slit at its center. Hoping that the vision held true, he placed the tip of the sword to the opening and pushed.

Despite the wall’s age, the blade slid in with little resistance. There was a mechanical click when the blade would go no further, and suddenly an immense light began to radiate and fill the cracks the wall. The floor and surrounding area began to shake violently and all of them simultaneously gasped as the brick below them fell away revealing clouds and a heavenly glow from below.

Dagger reached to grab on to something, but it was no use, the entire room was falling. An exhilarating sense of freefall over took them as they plummeted. He could faintly hear Ramza’s screams as the ground rushed to meet them. He closed his eyes tightly, waiting for the impact, but it never came. He opened his eyes and found that they were standing in a beautiful meadow filled with lush grass and a few delicate flowers scattered about.

“This place...” Dagger began, as she ran her hand along a blade of grass. “It’s so beautiful..”

“I have never seen a place so calm.” Ramza added as he walked to Zidane’s side and noticed what the blond thief was fixated on. A few feet in front of them, the Lightbringer hung in the air, unmoving as it had been in the wall.

“We must still be in the room!” Ramza exclaimed suddenly.

“So none of this is real?” Dagger asked with disbelief.

“I’m not sure..” Zidane tried to explain. ‘The guy that was talking to Rasler said that the secret was inside the wall and that it could save them. He called it a “Piece of the Gods’. What if it’s here, and not just behind the wall?”

“If it’s that powerful, then I suppose that would be possible.” Ramza replied thoughtfully.

“It would definitely be worth looking.” Dagger agreed.

“Well, I guess lets go!”

....

“You’ll get nothing from me, you bastards!” A man yelled, yanking violently at the chains that bound him.

“You’re awfully defensive for a man that claims not to care about others.” A white haired woman commented casually, wiping the man’s blood from her knife as she sat across him. “All you need do is tell us what you and that man were discussing. We would also love to know what your friends are up to. We know they’ve made it to the underworld, we just want to know what they aim to accomplish. We’ve had all twelve of the stones in our possession, but still they did not yield their true power, and yet the man you were seen with still managed to seal the underworld with them. The power unleashed was far greater than the twelve stones could have done, so what does he possess that we do not?”

She then turned to the brown haired woman chained next to the man. “Perhaps you are feeling more talkative?”

The woman had blood dripping from the corner of her mouth and from a cut above her blackened eye. “I told you I don’t know anything, I wasn’t even with him when he talked to that asshole!”

The white haired woman's face contorted with anger. "Don't play fools with me! I'm capable of things my brothers could never dream of! The torture you have endured thus far will seem like pleasure compared to what I am willing to do to get the answers I seek. So, I would suggest you tell me what I want to know and stop wasting my time!"

"Sorry bitch, I guess you'll have to kill us." The man replied with a grunt.

"Just tell her what the hell you know!" The woman pleaded, then shot the man a warning glare. "I swear to the gods if you get me killed over this bullshit I'll haunt you forever!"

The white haired woman looked at him expectantly, but to her anger he continued to say nothing.

Without warning, she stabbed the knife into his shoulder, twisting it for added pain. The man screamed in agony, his howls of pain echoing through the room and down the empty hallway.

After a few long excruciating moments, she pulled the knife free. The man could see that it was painted with his blood but still he said nothing and tried to block out the still white hot pain.

“Have it your way, I’ll find pleasure in breaking both of you.” She commented with a sudden crooked smile. He then watched in morbid fascination as she licked his blood from the knife. He felt his heart racing as she climbed into his lap seductively until she was straddling him with her arms and now held the knife behind his back out of sight. Had he been a little less sober, not in pain, and her a little less insane, he might have actually enjoyed this. But, he wasn’t, she wasn’t, and from the look the woman bound next to him was giving him he knew what was coming before he felt the tip of the blade press into his spine.

He screamed in agony as she slowly and methodically drove the knife deeper and deeper into his spinal nerves. His legs spasmed uncontrollably and any hope he had had to control them was gone, he vaguely wondered if he would ever walk again.

“That’s enough.” A man commented from the hallway, irritation clear in his voice.

Quickly the woman pulled the knife from his back and he gasped trying to catch his breath, the pain from the knife still excruciating even in its absence. He did allow himself a fleeting feeling of relief as the woman slid off his lap and turned

toward the man. "If I wanted him dead I would have already killed him myself." He drawled.

"Does it look like he's dead?" she countered. "I'm fully capable of doing this on my own Tarius. And where have you been? Father has been looking for you."

"Has he? I was unaware." Tarius shrugged indifferently. "I will speak to him later."

"You best not keep father waiting, you may be strong but father can take your strength away and make you nothing more than human." She chided.

"I wonder.." Tarius trailed off and walked toward the bound man. "You're wasting your time with them, I already know the answers we seek."

"You couldn't have possibly found out anything before I did!" She spat.

"I found the wielder of the Lightbringer." He replied with a smug grin.

"That's impossible. The Lightbringer was destroyed!"

"No, just as I had said before, that blade is not so easily broken. Though I think we can find solace in

that the blade no longer holds its glow. At least for now.”

“We must go speak to father at once.” The woman replied hurriedly as she walked past Tarius. He waved his arm in a sweeping motion. “By all means, lead the way Agetha.”

The pair then left the room, the prisoners forgotten. At least they hoped. “If we don’t find a way to get out of here now, I don’t think they’ll bother keeping us alive much longer.” The woman bound beside the man commented worriedly. “I really hope you have a plan.”

The man shook his head. “I told you not to come with me. This is why I work alone.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. You would have been dead already if it wasn’t for me!” She hissed.

He let out a strained laugh. “If I had known that we’d end up dying like this, I think I would have preferred to die sooner.”

“There’s no way in hell we’re gonna die in a piss ass place like this! Now, do you got a plan or what, Red!? I didn’t pick you to be my partner for your looks ya know!”

“Shut the hell up, Lani! I’m trying to get these damn cuffs loose.”

“You mean to tell me you can’t open a pair of cuffs!?”

“These are different than any I’ve seen. I don’t see you doin any better!” He growled at her and shot her a look of annoyance which quickly turn to disbelief as she raised her arms which were noticeably lacking the cuffs that still bound his tightly.

“Looks like you still need me after all.” She grinned.

He groaned to himself and shook his head as she quickly went to work on his own restraints. “So as I was saying, what are we going to do now?”

He tried to stand, but found it excruciatingly difficult. He began to tell her than he wouldn’t be going anywhere but found she was already under his arm helping him to stand. He motioned toward the hallway opposite the direction their captors had went. “For now, let’s just get the hell out of this room.”

She nodded and they carefully made their way down the hallway, hoping that their footsteps

wouldn't be heard. They passed by the other opening and could hear Tarius talking but couldn't make out his words. They continued down the hallway, until they arrived at a set of stairs. With a pained groan from Amarant, the pair climbed the stone steps and pushed the door open revealing a night sky. With great surprise they realized they were in a very familiar alleyway.

"How in the hell did we get to Treno so fast?" Lani asked incredulously. "And where is everybody?"

"Let's not stick around and find out." Amarant coughed. "Let's hurry up and get out of here before they realize we got free."

"That's easy for you to say, you weight a lot a hell of a lot more than I do!" Lani grumbled under his weight.

"You're the one that insists on coming with me." He groaned as they began down the empty streets.

"Do you even know exactly what they were wanting from us?" Lani whispered carefully, even though she was pretty sure they were well beyond the range of hearing. "Whatever it was, it better be worth it. Cause once they realize we're gone, they're

gonna hunt us down again and I don't think we'll get so lucky next time."

"Do you really think I'd risk dying if it wasn't?" he countered, grunting in pain again as she pulled him forward a little faster.

"I don't know, you've changed since you traveled with that tailed boy."

"...."

She shook her head in frustration. "If u can't tell me what it is, can you at least tell me what the hell is goin on? We barely made it out of Alexandria, all because you wanted to help people. Then we got ambushed in the plains by that bitch and whatever the hell those things were, only to spend god knows how long in that hell hole! And now this godsdamn place is as quiet and empty as a crypt! What the hell is going on?!" She finished frantically.

She almost toppled when he stopped suddenly. She turned to him, and taken aback by his cold seriousness. "Look, all I know is two things, first is that shit's gone to hell and it's only going to get worse. Second, we gotta get to Chocobo's forest."

She gulped. "Alright, what's at Chocobo's forest?" he didn't answer right away, so she chose to

press him. “Look, I know u still don’t trust me, but we’re in this shit together and like it or not, right now we’re all each other has.”

“Hopefully a big ass golden bird.” He grunted simply.

...

A/n: Sorry for the long wait, work has become a lot more hectic and i often find myself struggling to find the time to write. Chapters may be slower from here on out, but they will continue. As always, I hope you enjoyed the chapter and i look forward to hearing your thoughts or ideas!

21. Power Within

In truth, I am certain that I did very little to turn the tide in our favor.. Fate's current is not so easily swayed. But if my actions, any of them, allowed the others to succeed where i failed then perhaps... No. It is far too late for hopes of that.

...

It was strange, they had been traveling in the same direction for at least a few hours, but the sun had not moved. It was as if time itself stood still and just as the sword hung in the air, always an arms length in front of them, so to did everything else just as it had been when they arrived. Zidane and the others felt no tiredness or thirst, and they began to wonder vaguely if they were dreaming.

“Maybe we were wrong and there isn't anything else here?” Dagger offered as they stopped to check their surroundings.

“No.” Zidane shook his head. “There's gotta be something here, I can feel it.”

“Then I suppose it would be best if we keep moving, time may be frozen here but that doesn't

mean it isn't still moving for everyone else." Ramza reminded, though his voice held no signs of irritation.

Zidane and Dagger nodded in agreement and the trio set off walking again. They passed a small stream glistening with crystal clear water and even a few stray fruit trees as they tried to maintain as straight of a path as they could. There was no signs of life anywhere, including monsters. It was as if the place had never been touched by anything. In a way, they felt as if by just being there they were contaminating it somehow. They climbed to the top of a nearby hill and in the distance they could faintly discern what might have been a castle, but like everything else, there didn't seem to be anyone moving near it. With a defeated sigh, Zidane placed his hand on the handle of the sword in front of him. "I guess you were both right, we don't need to keep wasting time looking for something that might be here when we know for sure things are only getting worse in our world. If I pull the sword out, surely it will take us back. Are you both ready?"

They both nodded solemnly in agreement and Dagger placed her hand over his, hoping to offer him some reassurance. He smiled faintly at her and pulled the sword free, but to everyone's amazement,

nothing happened. The sword that had held a glow in his grasp earlier had again returned to an almost completely normal weapon. “What happened?” she asked worriedly. “Does that mean we’re trapped here?”

“I wouldn’t quite say that.” A small voice commented from their left. They turned sharply, startled by the fact that there had been no-one else around, only to see a young boy standing nearby. He either didn’t notice their surprise, or did not care as he continued casually. “I think you will find that castle in the distance to be familiar to you. Perhaps you will find the answers you seek.”

“Are you okay?” Dagger asked as she dropped to the boy’s level. ‘How did you get out here all by your’ her question was cut short as the boy walked through her toward Zidane as if she weren’t there. He looked at the ghostly boy curiously as he in turn stared at him with his cold dead eyes. “Did you even really try to save me?” he asked before fading away.

“Passing strange.” Ramza commented. “Perhaps it was a lost soul?”

“Either way..” Zidane started as he tried to make sense of the boy’s words. “I guess we better head to that castle.”

...

The castle had looked deserted from the hill, but as they arrived it became more than obvious that it had long since been abandoned. Much of the stone structures had crumbled away, consumed by vines and moss; even a tree had somehow grown from the center of one of its towers, knocking holes in the stone with its great branches. The main gate had fallen off its massive hinges and they were able to walk inside the courtyard unobstructed. Standing at its center was a ghostly woman that must have been waiting for them. "I hope you did not come here seeking a warm welcome." She stated coldly, her gaze locking on Zidane. He scratched the back of his head, uncomfortable at the clear resentment she and the boy held for him for some reason. "Sorry.. I uh.. I've never been here before and I've never seen either of you... I would have tried to help you any way that I could."

The woman did not respond, but a ghostly man emerged from the shadows to their left slowly coming toward them. "You killed me with your own blade, you said that you were saving me." Zidane and the others backed up a step, from their right another voice called. "Would you have bothered to help me if I had been someone else?"

To Zidane and the others, it seemed as if the entire castle had come alive with their resentment. Had they been sent here only to be attacked by the spirits that dwelt within?

“Where were you, when I choked to death on my own blood?” Zidane turned wearily to the ghost of the old man who spoke. “There’s been a mistake, I’d die before I would just stand and watch any of you die!”

“There is not mistake.’ The old man responded.” You are the wielder of the Lightbringer. It was in you that our hope rested. I speak for all of us when I say that its light has been tainted by the blood of innocents. Have you nothing to say for your transgressions?”

A part of him wanted to scream that he was not the same man; that surely Rasler had been the one that had done those things, but instead he nodded. “I can’t make right what was done to you, but I can try to stop the rest of the world from being destroyed and make sure that no one else suffers the same fate you all have.” Out of the corner of his eye he could see Dagger smiling at him in approval.

The old man eyed him carefully, the other spirits halting in their advance. “Perhaps... you are not the

same man that was here before, but there is still a great darkness at the pit or your being. A great and terrible darkness lies at your core.” Thoughts of when Garland had called him his angel of death flashed through his mind. “You must destroy the darkness within you and seek redemption if you truly wish to return peace to your world.”

“How do I do that?” he found himself asking.

The old man turned to the other ghosts, and they began to communicate in a language that couldn’t be understood. After a short time, he turned back to Zidane. “Together, we can pull the darkness from you, but it will be up to you to destroy the embodiment of that darkness. So, will you seek redemption?”

“I don’t think this is gonna be good, but yea.”

“So be it.” The old man replied as the rest of the ghosts swarmed them. Ramza and Dagger were thrown aside by their invisible force, and he could feel his arms and legs being firmly held in place as a sharp pain began to radiate from his chest. He screamed in agony as the pain became overwhelming. His vision swam and turned to white nothingness as the fear that he had made a fatal

mistake became what would surely be his last thought.

...

Zidane opened his eyes suddenly, unaware that he had closed them, only to find that he was standing in a place void of anything. He felt strangely detached as if his mind were floating in that white place. Trying to remember how he got there, someone appeared he had thought he would never see again.

“We are not so different, you and I, are we?” Kuja laughed. “You and I both know that if only things had been a little different, it would have been you that caused the world’s destruction. So, why deny who you are?”

Zidane shook his head. “No! I could never hurt innocent people the way you did! Maybe if I had been raised by Garland I might have been a different person, but I’m not! I’ll never be like you!”

Kuja did not reply but instead only grinned before turning into a cloud of blackness that lifted upward until it was no longer visible.

“You promised you would come back..” a small hauntingly familiar voice from behind him spoke.

He whipped around, and there stood Vivi just as he had last seen him “Vivi!”

The young mage didn’t share his enthusiasm as he gave Zidane an angry stare. “You promised you would come back but you didn’t even try, did you?” He couldn’t help be taken aback by the young mage’s anger. “I’m sorry, I would have been back sooner but i—”

“I don’t care! We ALL waited for you because we cared, but you didn’t care about anyone except yourself! I died hating you!” As he stared at the boy, a realization began to dawn on him. Zidane hung his head in sadness. “For a long time that is what I expected everyone to say, the ones that would be willing to say anything to me at all, but I was wrong. The Vivi I know understood why I stayed and I know he would never say that.”

“And yet, you’re still running from your past..” Zidane looked up at the unexpected change in voice only to be met with Garland. “It’s time to stop running and become the angel of death you were meant to be!”

“I’m not your angel of death!” Zidane yelled angrily.

“But you are, why can’t you see that? You are here to seek power to destroy your enemies; why then do you not embrace the power that is already yours. Is that truly so bad of a thing?

“...”

“You could use that power to save your worthless friends. With your power as an angel of death, the very ground beneath your feet would tremble.” Garland continued.

From the moment he had first met Kuja, he had wanted to be nothing like him. But, couldn’t he give in to becoming the angel of death and use the power to seal the underworld? He wouldn’t have to become a monster like Kuja, he could control it..

“Anything you could desire would be yours. Unlike Kuja, you are perfect. Your power would far and above exceed anything Kuja was ever capable of. You would be a fool to cast it aside, because as you are now, you stand no chance of defeating anyone.”

It would be stupid to throw it away wouldn’t it? He turned around and in his mind’s eye he could see Dagger still laying on the ground unconscious. Thoughts of her being killed by Damian or

something else flooded through his mind. There was no way he could let that happen to her; she had been through more than enough. He had the chance to become the weapon that would stop the all of the destruction and save the people he cared about. Did it really matter what happened to him in the process as long as everyone else was safe?

“What do I have to do?” He asked finally.

Garland grinned. “You need only put down that blade and step forward. I will awaken the power within you.”

He hesitated. Looking down at the Lightbringer, he remembered something Rasler had said in Treno.

“Uncaring? Perhaps I am. Would you venture to say that I am a monster?” Rasler countered.

“Well no, but—”

“Tell me, what difference does it make the methods I use or the thoughts that keep me moving forward as long as the end result is the same?”

“It may be that your intentions are noble, but once you let the end justify the means, you’ll try to make anything you do excusable!” Steiner argued.

Rasler scoffed. "You sit on your high horse of morals and yet you judge what you cannot understand. It's easy to say always do the right thing, but if you knew that doing 'the right thing' would doom all of those you hold dear, would you be so quick to make that decision then? I'd wager not."

"The right decision isn't always easy, but we have to do what is right, if we don't, who will?" Zidane countered.

"Let me ask you something Tribal. You would say killing an innocent is wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

"What if to save a hundred innocent people, it meant that you had to kill the one with your own hands, what then? Does the outcome then become more important than the means?"

Steiner had fallen silent then as Zidane tried to come up with a reply.

"Not so simple is it? But it doesn't matter either way."

The pair looked at him with confusion. "You're right of course, Ramza would agree with you. Like you, he would never do some of the things I have

had to do. Perhaps I have walked in the darkness for too long, but if that's true then perhaps I have only done so that ones like you can deal only in the light. So, hold to what you believe; we needn't always agree."

Zidane looked at Garland with renewed determination. "I won't do it. I won't become an angel of death. We may not stand a chance, but we didn't when we fought Kuja either and we still stopped him somehow. We may die, but as long as we're alive we'll never give up!"

Garland roared in anger and his image twisted, contorting into a dark crowd that rose into the air joining the others. Together, they created a black storm of energy that shook the castle walls themselves. With dread and an exhaustion that felt as though it might soon overwhelm him, he stared up at the black cloud. He didn't know if he'd be strong enough to defeat whatever came out of it, but for Dagger if nothing else, he would give it everything he had.

He couldn't make it out well, but something or someone began to take shape high above him. He gripped the sword so tightly that his knuckles began to turn white as the shape descended toward him. At

first it moved slowly, but as it drew near its pace intensified with no signs of slowing down. With no time to spare, he lifted the blade above his head barely catching a blackened blade similar to his own. As he took in the shape of the blade's wielder, it became obvious what the ghost had meant. He was fighting himself.

His arms shook as he struggled to push back his dark twin. The dread he felt earlier intensified as he realized it did not share any of his exhaustion. With little effort, the figure rebounded with a backflip and charged at him again. Knowing he wouldn't be able to block the attack, he rolled to the side just as the blade slashed where he had stood. He wondered what Ramza and Dagger would do if he failed, but he didn't have time to dwell on it as he brought his blade up to block yet another attack. The blow sent a shockwave through him that knocked him backward off of his feet.

A part of him knew that he didn't stand a chance of winning against this dark entity, but something in his mind screamed that he couldn't let his dark counterpart win.

"Giving up already?" His twin chuckled. "Stand to your feet and at least die with dignity!"

With shaky legs, he stood up and held the sword with both hands, its tip pointed forward. “Look at you!” The dark figure mocked again. “You’re nothing without me! Once I kill you, then I will do what needs to be done!” With a growl, he leapt toward Zidane again, swinging his blade furiously. Again Zidane caught the blade and tried to push it backward, but it felt as though he were pushing against a brick wall. He closed his eyes and for a moment it felt as though time stood still.

He felt distant, no longer seeing his opponent and no longer fearing defeat. Instead, He saw Dagger rushing to heal him only to watch himself cut her down in a puddle of crimson blood. The look on her face wasn’t betrayal; it was sadness. He saw himself attacking Ramza with the same viciousness before turning away from him. Dagger was standing again, her face bloody and eyes empty of the fire and passion he not only loved, but craved. With no emotion, she held out a black sword. “Is this what you want?”

“NO!” He screamed, breaking from his vision. He no longer cared if he was strong enough. He didn’t care if he didn’t stand a chance. In that instant, he no longer cared if he lived or died; He would not let them down. He opened his eyes and

saw with amazement that the Lightbringer had begun to shine. With it, his exhaustion and mental weariness were cast away and he felt renewed. No, not just renewed, he felt a peacefulness wash over him and the darkness he had been fighting now seemed diminished to almost nothing. The blade that had felt heavy now felt as if it were a weightless extension of his own arm.

“What is this?” the darkness asked, a slight tremble in its voice.

“I won’t let anyone hurt the people I care about anymore.” He replied simply and slashed the shining blade forward. The darkness that had been in him tried to block it, but its dark blade offered no resistance and in that one swift motion, it was destroyed.

Zidane returned his gaze again to the blade that had begun to settle into a white glow. With a gentleness, he returned it to his sheath. After a moment, he noticed that he was back in the castle. Ramza and Dagger were getting up, having finally regained consciousness. “What happened?” Dagger groaned, holding the side of her head in discomfort.

“I don’t remember anything.” Ramza replied slowly.

“I think everything’s okay now.” Zidane answered, wearing a faint smile that they were both alright.

“You have done well.” A voice commented lifelessly behind him. The trio turned around and saw the same elderly ghost from before. “You are indeed of the Light. We are.. Sorry we misjudged you.”

Zidane nodded in acceptance.

“Truly you have the potential to be a king of kings. Go now and take with you this.” The spectral man extended his hand revealing a diamond almost as large as his hand. Zidane reached forward and took it carefully. At first he thought it to be a regular diamond, but as he looked closely he could see a blue fire burning within.

The old man nodded as he began to fade. “It is the Shard of Life... The essence all creation... Be gone now, so that we might rest in peace.” They nodded in understanding, then the spirit was gone. As they began to think of walking back to where they had arrived in the strange place, the castle and world around them began to fade as well.

They felt the exhilaration of falling again, and within seconds they were standing in the empty chamber again. Dagger stared at the shard Zidane was holding, mesmerized by the blue flames within. “What do we do now?..” Her voice echoed through the empty halls of the abandoned castle.

22. Into Chocobo's Forest

Why am I still here? Why have I not been cast into the fire? I failed to find redemption and surely the gods have now forsaken me. But why can I still reason? Should not my thoughts be like ashes in the wind? Should they not have been blown to the edges of reality itself?

...

“Geeze, You weren’t kidding about it being golden.” Lani commented as she gazed at the Golden chocobo from the top of a nearby hill. The bird in question paid them no mind as it repeatedly plunged its beak below the grassy soil in what she guessed was an attempt at an afternoon snack.

“Yea, that’s the one.” Amarant sighed heavily, shielding his eyes from the sun with his arm. They couldn’t be more than half of a mile away, but with the injuries that had been dealt him, it seemed to be at least three times that distance.

“You wanna stop for a rest?” She offered hopefully, exhaustion not lost on her in the least.

“No.” He huffed without hesitation. “If we fall asleep before we make it to that damned forest, don’t make any plans of waking up.”

She would have argued the implausibility of his statement considering that there was nothing around them, nor were they being followed, but there was an eerie quietness that had become more than a little unsettling. How had things gone to shit so quickly? She wasn’t a fool by any means; she knew wars happened for reasons that often didn’t even matter and that there would always be some that hungered for food or thirsted for revenge based on some trivial debt. Hell, that was why she had become a mercenary in the first place. It was easy money. Besides, did it even matter if a random asshole in a suit suddenly met his untimely end? She didn’t think so, but this was different than any of that.

Kingdoms and cities didn’t just become ghost towns overnight, there was always a struggle that dragged on until things evened themselves out. What kind of monster could kill everyone without even leaving bodies behind? She shuddered at the thought and tried to instead focus on the ground ahead of her as they continued toward the forest.

“Do you think those friends of yours are even still alive?” She asked after a few minutes.

He didn’t answer at first and she began to wonder if that meant they were on their own. “I don’t know if everyone is still alive, but there’s no way in hell that damned monkey let himself get killed already. Wherever he is, you bet your gil Garnet’s with him.”

“What about the guy you talked to? Is he—”

“We can talk when we get there.” He nodded toward the forest that was now almost within throwing distance. She pressed her lips together into a thin slit and walked forward a little faster in determination.

...

Unlike everything else, the forest was peaceful without the disquieting feeling that had been hanging in the air. Amarant had never really cared about wildlife or nature for that matter, but hearing the birds chirp overhead and the sounds of the leaves rustling in the wind was calming. It almost made it possible to imagine that all the bad things that had happened recently were all in his head. Sadly, he knew that was not the case. It was probably only a

matter of time before this place was destroyed like everything else.

He shook his head to clear the unwelcome images and dipped his cupped hands into the cool clear water. Looking into the water he held for a moment, he saw his bruised and battered face in its reflection and decided he had made it out well. He gulped the water down and its almost heavenly refreshing coldness was exactly what he had needed.

“Do you think they will come looking for us here?” Lani asked tentatively.

“Probably.” He replied, not looking up from the water.

“Then why did we come here?” She asked, growing impatient. “What is going on?”

He splashed more water onto his face for a moment before turning toward her. “As much as I don’t like it, you’re right; I do have to trust you.”

Lani nodded incredulously. She had not thought he would ever give her the chance.

Amarant’s face grew even more serious as he began. “Those people, whoever they are, aren’t human. They may have been once, but not

anymore.” Lani looked as though she might interrupt him, but she remained silent. “I don’t know much about them, but I do know what they’re after.”

“What’s that?” She could not help but ask.

“They’re after the twelve Zodiac stones. I don’t know exactly what they are, but I know each one can grant a person’s wishes and if you were to have all of them, there’s no limit to what you could do. You could wipe everything off the face of Gaia or become some kind of god.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “So, you’re telling me these stones can grant us any wish we want? No wonder they’re after them! If we had one, we could wish for a king’s ransom in gold and then some! It wouldn’t matter who tried coming after us, we’d be untouchable!”

Amarant shook his head dismissively. “What good would gold do us if there won’t be anything left to buy? As for making us untouchable, I doubt one of them would be able to do much good when they already have the other twelve.”

Her hopeful expression fell, only to be replaced by confusion. “What do you mean the other twelve?”

Aren't there only twelve of them? Unless you mean..."

He could not help but smirk as he saw realization dawn on her face. "There's thirteen of them, and we have the last one. I buried it in the Air Garden and the only way to reach it is with that damn chocobo, though I'm not sure we should count on that. We probably need to go get it before we do anything else."

This time, it was Lani that smirked. "So, it's up to us to make sure they don't get last one, huh? Save the world and all that?"

"Something like that." He grunted.

She slapped him on the back, almost making him yelp in pain. "Well, it can wait til tomorrow. We both need the rest. Unless you're healed already?"

For once, he could not have agreed more. No sooner had he gently sat against a nearby tree, that his eyelids began to close of their own accord.

....

Lindblum

"We can't hold the outer walls much longer sir! We must fall back!" A panicked soldier yelled as

another boulder slammed into it nearby, causing three archers to plummet over the side and into the army below.

“No!” Roared Steiner as he grabbed onto a siege ladder and shoved it off the wall, sending its occupants hopefully to their doom. ‘These walls are still strong!’ He bellowed. “And so are we!” He grabbed the nearest archer and pointed roughly at the closest Siege tower. “Aim for that tower! Bring it down! We must hold! We must—” His sentence was cut short as he drove his sword into the rotten flesh of an enemy soldier that had come from his left. He yanked out his blade out of its chest and slashed its neck, sending its head over the edge.

The main problem with the enemy as he saw it, wasn’t that there were even more of them than first assumed, and there probably closer to ten thousand than a thousand, it was that had the horrid tendency to keep getting back up unless you managed to remove their heads. Even then, he was not quite sure all of them stayed down. He could have sworn he saw a headless soldier down below.

He turned toward the direction the undead soldier had come from and felt renewed admiration for Freya as he watched her fighting back a wave of the

enemies that had made it onto the wall. Even against this seemingly unsurmountable foe, she had not waivered nor had she let any fear cross her features. While it was true that the walls were yet holding, he was not nearly as sure of their integrity as he had tried to convince the troops. With each blow of the enemy siege weapons that had clearly risen from the ground, he could feel the stones below him shake ominously. How many more till it simply fell with them on top of it? No. He could not afford to let fear rise from the pit of his stomach and take over; if Freya could be brave in the face of death so could he! Had they not faced worse already?

In the distance, he could see the airships that remained returning for another pass, blasting as many of them as they could. With a grimace, he realized there were only five of them now, two of which were on fire. He had been a fool to think the enemy would be unable to retaliate against the airships without airships of their own. Four of them had already been brought down by burning arrows. It was only a matter of time before the others were taken down as well... Dammit! We were not prepared; even just a few more weeks could have made all the difference!

He was jerked from his thoughts as sounds of loud clanging erupted behind him, he spun around quickly and saw that a group of undead soldiers had made it over in his absence. Damn his foolishness! Without further hesitation, he charged them with a powerful swing, slicing the head of the nearest undead. The next was too close to maneuver his sword in time, so he grabbed it by its grimy chest plate and shoved it over the side of the wall. Blocking the blow of a third with his metal gauntlet, he swung again, but before his blade was able to connect with its target, there was an explosion that sent everything into slow motion.

His thoughts had been on cleaving the head of that soldier, but now he felt almost detached as he was blown backward by the blast. He could see and feel blood splattering onto his face, his vision turning red but could not tell if it was his or not. Either way, it seemed to be a trivial thing to ponder as he watched the edge of the wall rising above him. Pieces of the top of the wall where he had been standing looked to be hanging in the air. His vision was becoming a blur and he knew it would not be long before he hit the ground, and it would surely be a fall he would not be getting up from. Was Freya still holding? Or was she too— With a sickening

crack and white-hot pain, everything faded to black...

....

He felt... Soreness. It was as if every bone in his body groaned as he shifted slightly before trying to open his eyes. His head swam and his vision stung as he took in the stone ceiling above him. What had happened? Where was he? He tried his best to remember, but for now it was all a blur. Judging by how painful it had been to merely shift himself, he dared not try to sit up or turn his head too quickly. This place seemed familiar somehow. Had he been here before? Now that he thought about it, who exactly was he? Pressing the thought, he focused on trying to remember. Adelbert... Yes, that was his name. it was his job to... the queen!

He tried to bolt upright, but instead a bolt of intense pain shot through his body and it took all of his willpower not to scream. "I wouldn't so that if I were you." An elderly voice commented with little remorse. Straining his neck, he saw an elderly man scribbling on a piece of parchment. There was a lot of questions that he wanted to ask, but the most pressing one could not be contained. "Why can't I move!? What have you done to me!?"

The old man chuckled amusedly. “Done to you? Why I have done nothing to you at all.”

“Then why—” Steiner began, attempting to turn more fully toward him, but was cut off as the man continued as though he had said nothing.

“It was Eiko that healed you. Id reckon that most of the bones in your body were broken. What with a fall like that and the debris that fell on top of you, I’d say you were very lucky. Very lucky indeed.

Steiner looked down at his chest but all he could see was bandages with a few dark red stains here and there. “I fell?” he asked, more to himself than the old man, flashes of what had happened slowly returning to him.

“Well I’m not quite sure, I—” The old man started.

“Steiner! You’re awake!” Freya exclaimed from the doorway, hurrying inside.

“Doesn’t anyone ever knock?” grumbled the old man and he went back to scribbling on his parchment.

“Freya?” Steiner asked, his memory still returning. “What happened?”

“One of the siege towers managed to fire another shot before the airships were able to destroy it... it hit not far from where you were standing. Most of the wall is still intact, but walkway you were standing on was blasted apart. We thought you had died with the archers near you, but I think all that rusty armor Zidane always made fun of might have actually saved your life.” She finished with a humorless chuckle patting his shoulder gently.

“With a jolt, it all came back to him.” What about the enemy?”

Freya shook her head in an almost shocked disbelief. “Moments after you fell, they just stopped. Then, for no apparent reason they sank into the ground and disappeared.” Noticing his disbelieving expression, she added, “I wouldn’t have believed it either if I hadn’t seen it for myself; they’re just gone.”

23. Fallen Ally Pt 1

Candles flicker on the walls of the dimly lit castle room. Even with the layers of dust that covers much of the room, its obvious it was once ornately decorated. A set of golden armor stands next to the door, the candlelight reflecting off sections not hidden beneath the dust. At the center of the room, a large wood table sits. Unlike the rest of the objects in the room, the top of the table has been polished to a mirror sheen, though it is not empty. At its center, twelve different colored stones rest in circle; each giving off the aura that they are waiting for something, yearning for it.

“I trust my orders have been carried out exactly as I have instructed them?” The elderly man seated at the head of the table asked, his voice betraying no emotion.

“Yes, my lord.” Tarius answered bitterly as he walked toward the table. “Though I fail to see why you play these games. Would it not be wiser to just kill them?”

“Enough!” The man seated closest to the head of the table also stood up, knocking over his goblet of

wine, though he paid it no heed. Unlike the elderly man who seemed tired and feeble, this was a man whose strength is unquestionable. “You may be my son, Tarius, but do not think your insubordinations to Lord Garland will continue to go unpunished!”

“Have a seat, Tarius, if you will.” Garland beckoned, showing no signs that he had heard the man’s rebuke. With no comment, Tarius took a seat across from his father.

With a sigh, the man sat down as well, though his scornful expression did not change. After a few moments, he glanced toward the empty seat between Tarius and his sister. “Could Damian not be bothered to join us? Why don’t you go find him, Tarius?” He finished with a tone that suggested it was not a question by any means.

“I believe that would rather difficult, would it not, Velson?” Garland commented with a hint of amusement in his voice. Tarius paled slightly.

“What do you mean?” Velson asked, looking again at his eldest son.

Garland turned his unreadable gaze to Tarius. “Damian has passed. You saw to that quite thoroughly, didn’t you?”

Velson turned stiffly to Tarius. “You killed my son, your own brother?”

“I make no apology for my actions.” Tarius answered simply, though he sat rigidly in his seat, obviously awaiting retribution.

“Good.” Velson replied stiffly. “Perhaps some of my blood runs through your veins after all. Now, if only you could apply the same dedication to carrying out the orders I give you, then you might be worthy of being called my son.”

Tarius failed at hiding his surprise, but he did manage to keep silent, knowing his father’s wrath was better left unprovoked further.

“We have all of the stones now; shall we proceed?” Velson asked, seemingly unfazed by Damian’s murder.

“You are mistaken.” Garland replied simply. “We do not have all of them, as the will of the stones is still not open to us. The rumors of a thirteenth stone must have been true after all.”

“Does it really matter?” Tarius asked abruptly. Velson shot him a dangerous look but he continued anyway. “Without all of the stones, they cannot seal the gateway again and the assault on Lindblum was

nigh child's play. Why do we toy with them instead of wiping them from the face of world or making them our slaves to use as we see fit?"

"Guard your insolent tongue Tarius, you—" Velson spat, but was interrupted by Garland. "Because it is necessary."

"Necessary? It was necessary to call off the attack?" Tarius repeated, undaunted.

Garland's face grew bitter for a moment before responding. "We were not responsible for the retreat of our fiends... it was not our doing."

"...Was it them?"

"No. I have fought most of them before, gauging their power. They could not have done this. No, I believe they went back from whence they came. Without the stones or a host, It seems their time on the surface is limited. That is why we must have the stones."

"Without the stones, we cannot properly control the armies of the underworld." Velson added, still glaring.

"Would you have me go find the stone, then?" Tarius asked.

“Not yet, they possess the Lightbringer, so we must be cautious.” Garland Replied.

“Is caution wise my lord?” Velson spoke. “Perhaps the time for caution has now passed. It would be unwise to let the enemy regroup when the war is almost won.”

“What would you have us do then?” Garland asked calmly.

“The ones that carry the Lightbringer must be dealt with, and the stone must be collected. Of that, there is no doubt, but perhaps with the power of the stones we do possess, we can control the forces long enough to destroy the last of Lindblum’s forces.”

“Hmm..” Garland pondered. “If we attack Lindblum, Who would you have to Destroy Zidane and the others? He is the angel of Death, he will not be killed so easily.”

“I Have a rather interesting idea.” Tarius commented. “I sensed the darkness within him from the beginning.

....

“The room with the portal was at the end of this hallway, I am certain of it!” Ramza panted as he

placed his palm on the smooth stone.

Zidane wiped the sweat from his forehead with his armband and looked around. The hallway looked different than he had remembered.

“I remember it being here too.” Garnet replied breathlessly. “Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere?”

As they stood catching that breath, Zidane noticed that again the Lightbringer was vibrating, as if shouting for his attention. Glancing down at it, he could feel the edges of his vision begin to lose its color. “It’s happening again..” He whispered, as the others faded away.

The younger Rasler, and the now familiar old man stopped in the hallway not far from where he stood. “There is another matter that I believe it is imperative you are made aware of, my lord.” The old man began hurriedly.

“Marlow, How many times have I told you to call me Rasler? I am only human, just like you.” Rasler replied, with a tone of annoyance. “Just because I am a prince, does not mean you should worship the ground I walk! I’ve ever only ask that you give me the same courtesy as you would anyone else.”

Marlow shook his head in frustration. “But you are heir to the throne! A king by blood! Surely you cannot expect to be treated as a commoner!”

Rasler sighed, but did not look angry. “I think if all royalty were treated as commoners, the world might be very different, and wars avoided.”

Marlow seemed to be struggling not to reply but did manage to stay silent. Rasler looked around the hallway curiously. “Oh well, I do not suppose it matters now, the war has already begun... Anyway, why is it that you insisted on bringing me here? Is this the hallway that leads to the room with the orb?”

Marlow’s expression changed to thoughtful consideration. “Why yes, I suppose it was.”

“Was?”

“The answer to that, is in essence the reason that I have brought you here.” Marlow moved to run a hand along the wall where Ramza had been.

“I don’t understand.”

Marlow grew distant, reflecting. “Not all objects or structures are simply the base materials used to craft them. This part of the castle, for example, is

not just the mortar and stone that was used in its construction. I believe that sometimes, rare as it might be, that the objects become alive.”

Rasler looked at the wall skeptically but made no comment.

“I have walked these halls a great many times in the course of my life and not once have they ever been the same. They twist and turn, changing so that you always arrive where it wants you to go.”

“and if we wanted to go somewhere else?”

Marlow grinned, as if expecting his question. “Then you need only clear your mind and prove that your will is stronger than its.” Marlow placed both of his hands on the wall and began to push.

Rasler let out an amused laugh. “I think your old age is getting to you, there is no way that—” His look of bemusement changed to one of disbelief, as the wall began to move. Dirt and small pieces of gravel fell from the cracks overhead as the walls shook as if under some great force. There was an eerie groan as Marlow continued to push the wall, moving it inch by inch. Suddenly, and with a noise that was almost a bang, a hallway stretched out before them where the wall had been.

“That is impossible.” Rasler breathed in wonder.

“And yet, it is so.” Marlow nodded toward the hallway. “Now this hall will lead us back to the newer part of the castle.”

“This makes no sense! Objects cannot be alive!” Rasler exclaimed.

“Impossible or no, many objects very much have a will of their own... Do you truly believe this one castle is unique?”

With that, the vision faded. Again, he was greeted by the faces of Garnet and Ramza watching him carefully.

“I take it the vision has passed?” Ramza asked. “What did you see?”

“If we want to get out of here, I think all we have to do is force our way there.” Zidane replied, placing his hands on the wall as Marlow had done.

“What do you—” Garnet began but stopped abruptly as the wall began to shake. Just as in the vision, after a few moments of pushing against the wall and concentrating on where they needed to go, there was a bang and where the blank wall had been, a door now stood a few feet in front of them.

“Well, I have never seen anything like that before.” Ramza commented quietly as they made their way through the door.

“Thank Ramuh, we finally made it!” Garnet exclaimed as the faintly glowing portal came into view.

“I think we could all use a little fresh air.” Zidane commented. Truth be told, even though he hadn’t been in the underworld long, something about it did not sit well with him and he couldn’t wait to go back to the surface.

With a nod of agreement, they stepped onto the teleporter. As before, the light from the teleporter began to flood the room. But, as they braced themselves for the violent shaking that was sure to follow, the light faded, and the room stood still.

“What happened?” Garnet asked, looking around the room.

“This cannot be good.” Ramza commented, his expression grim.

“Going somewhere?” A voice echoed from the dark corner of the room. With it, Garnet’s stomach sank with dread. She would have almost rather it have been Damian.

From the shadows stepped her dark twin, but with her face was now covered in cracks as though she were a clay pot that had been quickly glued back together after shattering. “If you want to leave this place, you will have to destroy me as I have no intention of letting you go anywhere but to your graves!”

“With all three of us working together, taking that thing down shouldn’t be too much of a challenge!” Zidane exclaimed, as they readied their weapons.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” The creature wearing Garnet’s faced smirked. “My masters have given me the help I need to destroy you.”

“And what is that?” Zidane spat.

“I am no longer fighting on my own.” She laughed darkly. “My loyal subject will be more than glad to assist me in destroying all of you! Isn’t that right love?” She waved her arm, and the last person Zidane had expected to see stepped out from behind her.

“Rasler!” Ramza gasped.

It was indeed Rasler, But it only took a few seconds for them to realize that something very wrong. No longer did Ramza feel any sort of joy at

seeing his old friend; Instead, all he could feel was the same dread he had come to learn all too well. Not only was the unsettling dread all but radiating from him, but no longer did his eyes hold any life at all.”

“Yes, my queen.” Rasler answered simply and with no emotion, his face remaining expressionless. He stepped towards them and pulled a blade as black as midnight from its sheath. His movements were fluid but almost to the point of drunkenness.

Ramza gazed at him sadly. “I am sorry my dear friend. I swore to you that I would do whatever I had to do to destroy you if it ever came to it. As you know, I keep my promises!”

“But will you have the heart to kill me Ramza, after you learn of my secret?” She teased and stepped closer.

“There is no secret you could tell me that would stop me from wanting to end you and the damage you’ve done!”

“Not even my true name? When I was human?”

Zidane didn’t know Ramza very well, but even he felt his stomach sinking in anticipation of what she was about to say. Her grin was almost sickening.

“I think you should know my name well. After all, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten your own sister?”

“No!” Ramza gasped, backing up. “That— That’s a lie!”

Again, she stepped closer. “You know that it is true, brother. I am Alma Beoulve, or at least I used to be. That is until you killed me with your own blade.”

“No! My sister is dead!” Ramza shouted.

“Indeed I am.” She cackled. “You saw to that didn’t you? Where did you think I would go after that fiend corrupted me?”

Ramza’s face paled and his hold on his blade grew so tight that his knuckles turned white and the tip of his blade began to shake.

“I needed your help, instead all you cared about was everyone else!” She was almost screaming now, and a ball of dark magic began to crackle in her hand. “It was YOU that made me what I am! And now you will pay the same price that you dealt to me!” With an angry lunge of her arm, a Dark ray of energy shot towards Ramza.

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A/n: Wanted to say thank you to everyone that has has the patience to stick with me through this story and continue to read each chapter! I definitely want to give a shoutout to those of yu that have taken the time to review, your words are what inspire me to keep writing! Thank you!

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